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Dynamite Cargo

FRED HERMAN

Dynamite Cargo

CONVOY TO RUSSIA

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MANUFACTURED IN THE U.S.A. BY H. WOLFF, NEW YORK

TO
SUSAN B. ANTHONY II
The first newspaper woman
who interviewed me

Introduction

I KNOW FRED HERMAN. Our country has many Fred Hermans roaming the seven seas fighting for their country, carrying the precious supplies to our allies, supplies without which we could not achieve victory.

These merchant seamen are not in uniform, they do not march in any parades, they are not welcomed in service men's canteens. But their job is one of the toughest in fighting history. This Fred Herman and his pals, many of them without experience, but none of them without courage, manned their guns while under relentless attack from U-Boats and enemy planes day and night. Never knowing when

death would strike, when a hit on their highly explosive cargo would blow them to pieces, these men fought through grimly, never flinching.

The Fred Hermans are from towns and villages all over the United States, like Fayetteville, New York, where this writer's father runs a bookstore. Some came from farms, some from gas stations, some from trades; most of them had never shot anything more lethal than a .22 before boarding the Liberty Ship. Yet when the crisis came, they fought like demons. And it was a crisis which seemed to last forever, a constant front-line war; even when the deafening sound of ships exploding all around ceased, it was only a signal for a war of nerves which endured until the next violent upheaval.

If this book will serve to awaken Americans to the job that the merchant marine is doing, if it will make Fred Herman's countrymen recognize this extraordinary lonely valor, if the book will make inapplicable the unhappy statement that "the people of Russia seem to appreciate the American merchant marine more than Americans do," then it will not have been written in vain.

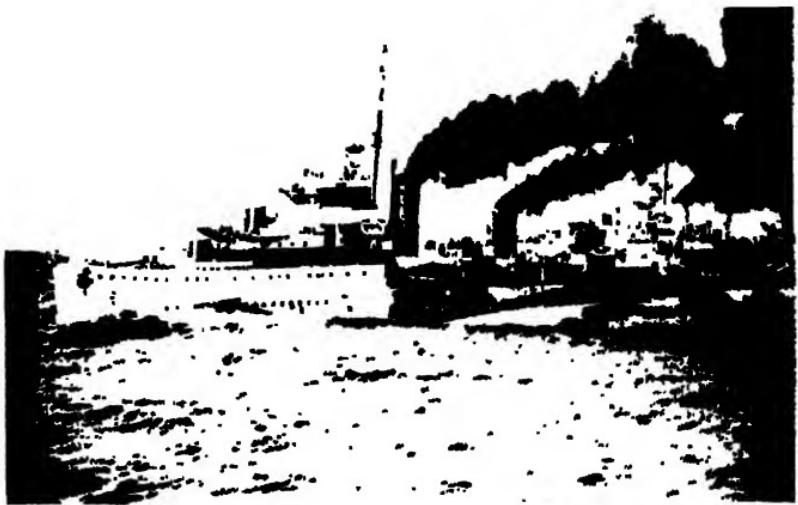
MADELEINE CARROLL

Special Representative, United Seamen's Service



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General view of Russian-bound convoy

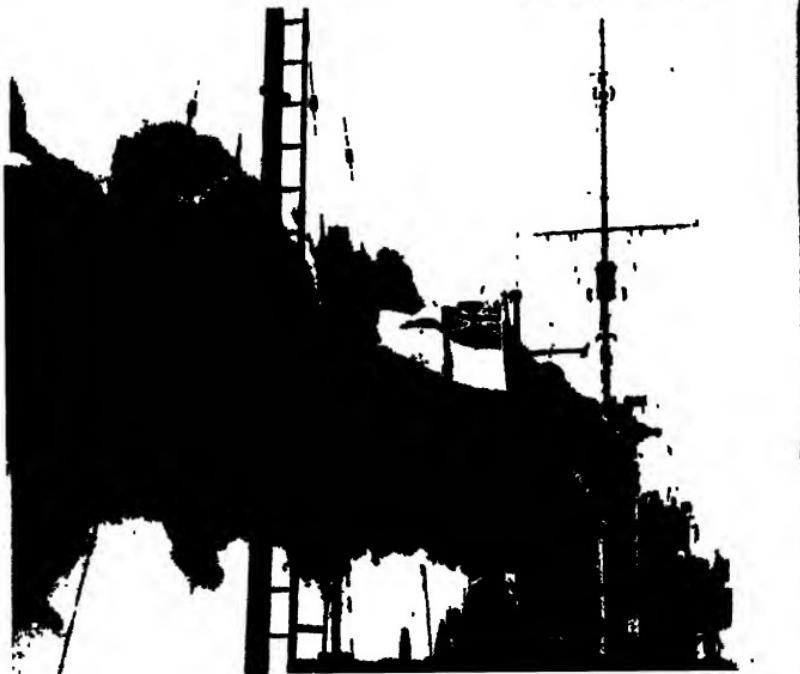


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One of the destroyer escorts

A destroyer lays a smoke screen

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A bomb almost scores a hit on an aircraft carrier

A close-up of the near miss on the aircraft carrier

BRITISH OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH



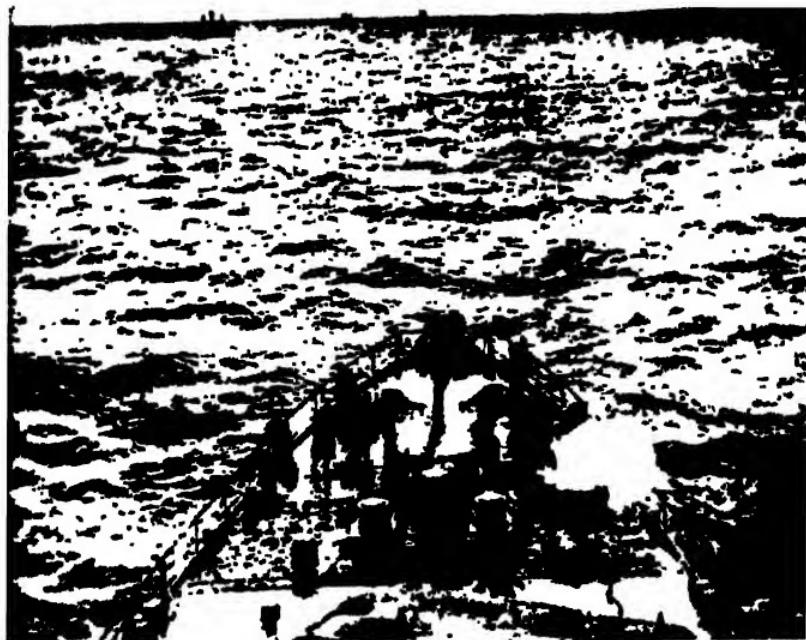


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The sky filled with the bursts of anti-aircraft shells, fragments of which can be seen falling into the sea



BRITISH NEWSREEL PICTURES



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Looking from the bridge of a cruiser escort. On the fo'c'sle
stokers are de-icing the chains and capstan with a jet of
steam

The towering pall of smoke marks a stricken merchant-
man

BRITISH NEWSREEL PICTURES





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At the height of the attack on the convoy the merchant ships, seen through a drifting smoke screen, plow on

A merchantman bombed in the convoy

BRITISH OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH





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Three British destroyers that formed part of the escort

Rear Admiral R. L. Burnett, O.B.E., in command of the escorting forces, being piped aboard a destroyer from the cruiser H.M.S. *Scylla* in mid-ocean

BRITISH NEWSREEL PICTURES





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Survivors from a merchantman sunk by enemy action are transferred from one ship to another during the voyage

American merchant seamen, survivors from a torpedoed vessel, can still smile after their ordeal. They are being issued clothing by a British naval rating

BRITISH OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH



Chapter One

THE VOICE CRACKLED through the loudspeaker system and into the mess room: "Here they come," it said. "Five, seven, twenty-two, thirty, forty-four torpedo bombers coming in." The voice was from the warship's bridge. "You chaps below—lie prone for a bit."

We chaps below lay prone, feeling no humiliation. Scotty, the Old Man, the Cape Verde Negroes, the Russian women, all of us crouched down like Moslems in prayer. I'll bet there were a lot of prayers uttered, at that. People certainly pray when they are as helpless as we were then.

DYNAMITE CARGO

I considered the chances of our getting out of these quarters if the cruiser was hit. The nearest exit to me was a manhole at the top of a narrow, perpendicular ladder. I remember catching Scotty's eye and seeing reflected the panic that I felt. One of the Negroes had his hands over his head, rolling his eyes at the ceiling. Near me was a big, pale Russian girl with close-cropped hair. Her face was expressionless.

The unruffled voice came over the loudspeaker again: "I thought I ought to caution you because the chap heading in for us now seems rather determined. Steady now, all of you. Hold hard—"

It was more of a sensation than a sound. The deck under us seemed to reel and lift. The lights went out. In the darkness, in the confusion of noises I heard a man shout a long and eloquent curse. It was our cook. Then there was silence.

The loudspeaker crackled out again: "A little close for comfort, that, but a miss is as good as a mile. You chaps all right? Don't pay any special attention if your lights go out. The electricians will rig up something. Now steady once again because here comes another fellow . . . But no, never. Our A.A. got that one."

DYNAMITE CARGO

I let out my breath and wiped my hands, which were clammy. Not for the first time I wondered what in the name of God's providence I was doing here anyhow.

Willy had the frankest answer.

Willy was an ordinary seaman on the freighter in which we had sailed. He had been raised on a farm in Nebraska and appeared to have no interests in life whatsoever. He would lean on the rail for hours with a dead pan watching the sea gulls fight over our garbage. Maybe Willy had some profounder thoughts than any of us realized.

Willy was an orphan, raised by an uncle who was "as mean as pusley," Willy said. His career of adventure began one night when he fed his uncle's horses. This was one of Willy's many chores. There were three horses. "I figured that for once't I would give them poor nags all the fodder they could stow away," said Willy. He filled up their mangers and went to bed. By morning the horses were swollen up like balloons. All three were dead. Willy admitted that his uncle "was riled some."

He lit out and hitch-hiked across country. It was one of the bad years when Dust Bowl farmers were

DYNAMITE CARGO

moving to California, and Willy had a hard time until he got a job washing dishes in a Kansas City restaurant. From there, somehow or other he drifted down to Galveston, Texas, where he got his first sight and smell of salt water. He went to sea as a deck hand on a Gulf steamer. Then he shipped on an Atlantic coastal tanker. I asked him why he had shipped on the North Atlantic run when we were bound, as everyone knew, for Russia.

"The wages was high," said Willy.

Maybe we all had the same motive as Willy. There had been a wiper in our engine room who was trying to hit the jack pot because he wanted to go back and buy a lot of gaudy and expensive furniture for his kid brother, who was marrying a girl from Dedham, Massachusetts. "Her family is putting on the ritz that their baby is marrying beneath her," he explained.

As for me, I had rolled into New York off a coastal run looking for some excitement. East Coast motorists were on gas rations. The Germans were sinking oil tankers from Cape Sable to Havana. But I had never had a glimpse of a U-boat. I had been on tankers too. I had even made a couple of trips to

DYNAMITE CARGO

Britain in freighters. I was in a mood to crowd my luck and play all the numbers.

I dropped in at a Navy recruiting station to make some inquiries. They told me I fitted the description. I was twenty-five years old, single, no dependents, not even any romances, free as air, probably sound of mind, definitely sound of body (over six feet and weight around two hundred). They indicated they would snap me up and make a petty officer of me in no time if I would give them the opportunity. The pay was not remarkable, they admitted, but this was for my country. I told them I would think it over and drifted on. Half a block away I ran into Scotty.

Scotty and I had shipped together on one of the oil company boats. He was a bowlegged little guy from Annapolis, Maryland, where he used to make a living as a waterman, mostly tonging oysters, until he got a hernia. For the last six years he had been going to sea. We went into a bar to talk it over.

He told me he was shipping Russian. Scotty had a mind like a mercantile balance sheet and he had figured it all out: \$100 a month base pay as an able-bodied seaman plus another \$100 war bonus, \$125 more if your ship touched the British Isles, another

DYNAMITE CARGO

\$60 if she touched Iceland, another \$125 for Russia, to which the U.S.S.R. added yet another \$100. And on top of that, fifteen per cent of your base pay extra—"penalty money"—if your ship carried more than fifty tons of explosives.

Full of ideas and whisky, I went over to Jersey with Scotty to see the ship he was going in. She was one of these new Liberty ships that were rolling off the nation's ways. She was 10,000 dead-weight tons, built with all her works amidships. According to Scotty, who studied such matters, she had enough compartments so that she wouldn't sink with the first hole blown in her. She could be blown open and still float. Her ordnance took my eye.

After all, my country also needed men to man its cargo carriers. As a matter of fact, the mortality rate among merchant seamen was higher than among regular Navy men. It was then; it probably still is. Sinkings of Allied shipping as I write this are at a sickening rate. My guess is that at least 3,000 seamen every month are having their ships blown out from under them. Some of these poor guys are picked up. But not all of them.

I do not want to sound as though I am trying to elevate my motives. Like Willy, with me I guess it

DYNAMITE CARGO

was principally the wages. For just a little quick, if nasty, work a man could clean up. I also had an intimate reason which naturally I did not reveal to Scotty. The day I began reading Joseph Conrad, in Fayetteville, New York, I got this idea. I figured that I would go to sea and some day publish my autobiography. I had already begun writing it. A trip to Russia with a cargo of dynamite ought to provide some material.

Scotty and I ran into a fellow in a bar who advised against it. He became quite vehement, claiming that he had been on the run and knew all about it. He sounded to me like a Fifth Columnist. His pals, however, said no, he had actually shipped to Russia and had come back bomb-batty. Scotty and I agreed that anyone who would be influenced by that kind of talk was yellow.

Anyhow, in the end I signed on.

Chapter Two

WE DID NOT take off for Russia immediately. There were some long delays while we careened up and down the East Coast. We used to listen for news broadcasts about Arctic shipping because our route ultimately would take us there. But there was no news from that theater of war. Most of the marine news was from the South Pacific and concerned the Navy.

On the *Jason's* deck (it was not her name but it will identify her) were some hundreds of thousands of pounds of war matériel—tanks, detonation caps and dynamite.

DYNAMITE CARGO

We were in convoy. Navigating in convoy is a special technique. The British are masters of it now, but in the beginning of the war they had plenty of disasters. For a while they lost more ships from collisions than from U-boat attacks.

As long as the visibility was good and we could see the rest of the vessels in the long, slow-moving parade, it was comparatively easy to keep our position. But we ran into dirty weather. One by one the ships ahead of us vanished into the fog bank that was rolling in from the sea. Thick as oatmeal, it closed around the *Jason*, blotted out the ships astern and left us poking along blindly with no guidance but the Old Man's best guess.

Hour after hour wore by with no sign of its lifting. The Atlantic night began to shut down. Sailors are scared of fog. Below, among the men off watch, ideas began to float around, such as: we were out of the convoy; the Old Man was in his dotage and incompetent. The Old Man was nearly seventy. He had retired to a ranch he had bought in Texas and had been living there when the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor. When merchant skippers got scarce the Old Man had sold his stock, locked up his ranch, driven his wife into town, told her good-bye, and

DYNAMITE CARGO

returned to the sea. He had already been torpedoed twice before he took command of the *Jason*. The second time he had drifted in an open lifeboat two days before he was rescued by the Navy. The Old Man had plenty of stuff in spite of his age, as we found out later. But the talk around the crew's mess made me uneasy.

I had turned in at the end of my watch on the first night out when Scotty came by. "Our convoy is all crossed up," he said. "We're in a hell of a mess."

"Where did you get all that?"

Scotty said shortly: "Better get on deck."

I climbed into my rubber suit and went topside. The sea was black and flat and oily. The fog and night simply engulfed us, so that you could not even see the lookout in the bow. A group of us shuffled together in the alleyway forward of the galley. We were standing there grumbling when the *Jason* got it. The impact knocked us arse-over-teakettle on to the deck. With the crash came a great rending and tearing of steel. We got on our feet. There was no panic. We knew our stations and we headed for them.

Mine was on the boat deck, where I was supposed

DYNAMITE CARGO

to take charge of No. 2 boat. There was no longer any No. 2 or No. 3 boat. They had been pruned from their davits by the sharp bow of a vessel that had sheered along our side and plunged into us just abaft the bridge. Everything looked strange and indistinguishable in the darkness. I saw that the port wing of the bridge had been smashed. I also made out the burly shoulders of the Old Man, and his head thrusting out like a turtle's as he surveyed this damage. He yelled something through a megaphone, pointed in the general direction of the other ship's bridge and presently the *Jason* began to shudder like a sick dog.

She was trying to back away. It felt as though she would shake herself apart. Metal wrenched noisily against metal, until at last we got sternway and began to edge off. In the thick darkness there was a sudden shower of sparks where the two steel hulls were rubbing and clashing. I had a recollection of the dynamite in our hold.

But finally we were free. We were ripped open almost down to our keel. One of the crew began to yell that we were sinking. The gash was in our No. 4 hold and out of it washed case after case of detona-

DYNAMITE CARGO

tion caps. They vanished in the black, oily sea. The *Jason* rolled slightly and settled.

Out of the darkness came a hail: "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I think we're all right," the Old Man croaked. "But stand by a bit. The mate's taking soundings."

We were bathed at that moment in a searchlight. One of our escorts had come mincing up and turned her light on us. It was the signal for the ship which had hit us to turn its light on us too, and there we sat for all to see, including any U-boat that might, by some mischance, have been in the neighborhood.

We did not sink. The *Jason*'s multiple compartmentation preserved her. Though she was loggy and a little unwieldy she got under way and limped along O.K. The ship which had cut into us was apparently undamaged and the escort stayed with us. Through his megaphone her captain told the Old Man that yes, the convoy had got mixed up but was now getting straightened out. As for us, he said, he was taking us into port. The escort stood by until we groped our way inside the channel buoys of an East Coast harbor.

Chapter Three

THE MAJORITY OF us belonged to the National Maritime Union, which has jurisdiction over most of maritime labor on the East Coast. The N.M.U.'s policy is to lay off wrangles for the duration. After the war is over we can—and probably will—start squawking for higher base pay, better conditions, etc. But not until the war is won. If any labor baiters have doubts about this policy, they only need to look at the record.

That isn't to say we gave up organizational activity. We believe in solidarity forever. A time will come when our services won't be in such great demand.

DYNAMITE CARGO

Before the *Jason* sailed we elected a delegate to carry our complaints to the Old Man. We also elected committees: donations committee, library committee and, chiefly, a safety committee. The safety committee's job is to see that all lifesaving gear is in order and, if not, make sure that the Old Man orders it fixed. In the early days of the war the N.M.U. and its safety committees raised such hell that some tight-fisted owners had to mend a lot of their negligent and penurious ways. Theirs was a policy that had been responsible for some terrible tragedies—the *Morro Castle* disaster, for instance. Anyone who wants more of that unwholesome story of the prewar American merchant marine has only to consult the records of the government Committee for Safety at Sea.

The government committee accomplished a lot but not enough to satisfy the union. When the maritime labor situation got tight and after a lot of torpedoed crews had been lost for one unnecessary reason or another, the union began to get some of the action we thought was due. The tightwad owners had to replace rotten lifebelts, provision boats with decent, adequate rations, equip ships with well-built rafts. The old rafts used to break to

DYNAMITE CARGO

pieces—the nails came right out of them—when they banged overboard into the water.

Our union safety committees, which usually included some old hands who had been torpedoed, also educated the rest of the crew. They gave out such advice as how to leave a sinking ship; what to do in flaming oil on the sea to avoid being fried to death; how to get rid of sharks that rubbed against your lifeboat (smack them in the nose with an oar).

The committee also waited upon the captain and suggested, or demanded, such things as buckets of water in handy spots around the ship so that a man, if he was trapped, could soak his shirt, wrap it around his face, and dash through the flames. Of course, some captains bridled at what they thought was a usurping of their authority. And some committeemen carried things too far. The morning after the collision, one of our committeemen went to the Old Man bellowing that some of the deck rails and stanchions had not been picked out with white paint. During the time that we were blacked out one of the men had stumbled and skinned his knee.

The Old Man was reasonable. He approved of the safety committee and seemed prepared to get

DYNAMITE CARGO

along with us. In view of everything, no one expected any trouble. But we had been in port only a week before we had some.

Some of the boys decided to demand their pay for the voyage, up to then, and shore liberty as of the day of the demand. This was not in the contract. You sign on for the whole voyage. But the boys thought they had something that covered the situation in the union rules.

The Old Man demurred. He said they were "refugees in their own country" and the situation was outside the contemplation of the rules. The union delegate, a fellow named Johnson, said, "This is within our rights, Mr. So-and-So. We're walking out." The Old Man probably hated the union's guts, as most skippers do, but he did not want a strike on his hands. He gave the boys their advance and they went ashore.

The whole thing was put on the basis of rights and union rules. One of the loudest in his demands was a guy we had nicknamed the Salesman because he was always trying to sell us on the revolution. Actually, the trouble was not union trouble at all. This handful of wrong guys had flunked out. They were scared. They had behaved all right the night of

DYNAMITE CARGO

the collision when the sparks were flying into the *Jason's* gaping No. 4 hold and we thought any minute we would all go to hell in a sheet of flame, but now that we were safe ashore, thinking back on it, they had fallen apart. They had decided they did not care to carry munitions to Russia. I think the Old Man suspected it and knew he would never see them again. I also think he was glad to get rid of them, even though it left him with the need of signing on new hands.

Sure enough, they never came back. Curiously, the Salesman did not go. With him apparently it was just a matter of principle. The Old Man got a break in the quality of his new hands. Three were Gloucestermen who had been brought up on the Grand Banks. Four were barrel-chested Cape Verde Negroes who could scarcely speak a word of English. If they bellyached it was in a language nobody could understand. They pulled their weight, and more.

We were in port almost a month, unloading, going into dry dock. Then we only got a patch-up job. They told us that we would have to go back to our home port for complete repair and that a tank in our hold had probably saved us from being cut

DYNAMITE CARGO

clean in half. The tank, which had been squashed against a bulkhead, had taken the brunt of the blow.

We left port in another pea-soup fog. It happened to be my trick at the wheel. The local pilot was still with us, giving orders and taking us gingerly out to the open sea. A tugboat was escorting us, milky white smoke belching into the fog from her dirty little stack. Even though she was chugging along just off our bow, she was sometimes hard to see. The first we knew of any danger was when someone aboard her gave a yell.

The ship which hit us was feeling its way up the harbor. This time it was a glancing blow which merely stove in a few plates along the top of the strake, so it was well above our waterline. There was an exchange of amenities through the megaphone. The other ship was a tanker. Everybody was all right and we proceeded on our way.

But this second accident had a curious effect on us. We discussed it with great gusto. We were actually pleased. Sailors are superstitious. We were convinced that we had had all the hard luck that was

DYNAMITE CARGO

coming to us and from now on we would be immune.

We did get back to our home port without another mishap. We were there two months. I would not know why it took so long, when they were building whole ships in less than half that time. For days on end there was not a lick of work done. Then riveters would rush aboard and turn the ship into an inferno. They would work twenty-four hours a day while we hung about unable to sleep a wink, not even able to talk except by yelling at each other in the incessant, hellish racket of the riveting. It was too much for a few men. They quit and got other berths. By the time we were ready to sail practically only Willy and the Salesman and Scotty and I were left out of the original crew. We steamed out, loaded again with munitions and tanks.

We got out of line once, in almost the same spot where we had had our first collision. We just missed getting smacked again. Running at night, blacked out, we blundered into another convoy, but our lookout saw the ship bearing down on us just in time. There was a brief, wild tooting of whistles, the *Jason* swung to starboard and cleared the stern of the other ship by a whisker. So we finally made our

DYNAMITE CARGO

first convoy rendezvous. There, we were herded into line and started off for a point, as we understood it, somewhere in mid-Atlantic.

A lot of captains in those days were "losing" their convoys. If there is anything a seaman hates it is close quarters. It makes him jittery. A mass of thousands of tons of steel sliding through water is not easily controlled. I once heard one old boy declare: "These goddam convoys are more dangerous than the subs. I'd rather take my chances with torpedoes."

I expect our Old Man had the same feeling. But I don't think he was contemplating any skulduggery, and in any case I heard the young and very solemn ensign, who was in command of the *Jason's* Navy gun crew, warn our captain against trying any monkey-business. The Old Man replied merely: "I understand my orders, Mr. Hawley."

We arrived on a gray morning in a flat sea at the point which had been designated. Our convoy was intact and we were on schedule. Signal flags fluttered from the flagship of the escort, and the *Jason* and her big-bellied, high-sided sisters, laden with their supplies, crawled on.

DYNAMITE CARGO

I doubt if any one of us could have got lost then if he had wanted to. It was a monotonous parade at the speed of the slowest ship. The British ships were in and out of us, streaking around us, keeping us in line, and apparently never for a minute out of touch with us, no matter how black the night or foul the day. You would wake up some morning with the fog suddenly clearing and see nothing but an empty horizon and think now you were hopelessly out of your reckoning and lost. But all the time you had been under their eye or at least within their calculations. One of the little ships would appear, and a cheerful voice would give you your bearings. Occasionally it must have been a little humiliating to the Old Man.

Once when we had straggled afar, the flagship hove in sight and broke out a string of signal flags which advised us to consult St. Luke, Chapter 15, Verse 6.

Young Hawley, the ensign, had a Bible. I was doing my trick at the wheel, and he came up to the bridge with it and read the verse to the Old Man: "And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost."

DYNAMITE CARGO

The Old Man made no comment. But he kept us on our toes after that. He everlastingly checked his position, growled orders to the man at the wheel, issued instructions for the lookout to keep the bridge constantly apprised over the telephone of what was going on. About two weeks out of port we made our landfall in the British Isles.

Chapter Four

IT WAS A dreary, weather-beaten shore and a crowded anchorage somewhere in the United Kingdom. Bald, treeless hills lifted themselves from the gray harbor. There was no sign of a house or a human being. I found out later that all the country immediately surrounding the harbor had been pre-empted by the government, the people put on an allowance and moved inland. A British sailor on a near-by ship which we visited told me about it. There were houses, he said, but you could not see them, even with binoculars. Centuries-old native houses had been built so that they would be

DYNAMITE CARGO

invisible from the sea. The idea was to fool invaders—formerly marauding Danes—who would not think the place worth raiding. If they did land they would not expect to meet the swarms of doughty defenders who suddenly pounced on them from those silent hills.

After a few days our nerves were rubbed raw. We were idle, with little to do except think about the last leg of the trip which lay ahead of us. The show would begin when we steamed out of the harbor. Somewhere on the route the Nazis could be expected to appear. We all had a kind of stage fright and began to grow ugly with the strain. I tried to do some work on my manuscript, but most of what I wrote stank.

The Salesman annoyed me more than anybody. He was born a sourpuss. He was a boss fighter, a cop fighter, a captain-and-mates fighter, a mess-boy fighter. His ugly face was marked. On the back of his head, which was as bald as a binnacle, was a scar that looked as if someone had once tried to open his skull with an axe. The Salesman was an Irish-Canadian but he had landed in California at an early age and, there, had been an old-line I.W.W. agitator, a "Wobblie," before he went to sea. I think

DYNAMITE CARGO

he went to the Pacific Coast deliberately because there were plenty of ruckuses into which he could push his mug.

His creed was down with everything, particularly capitalism. Capitalists started wars. They wanted to exterminate the common man. He decided I belonged to the capitalist class because I once went to school and my father owned a bookstore in Fayetteville, New York. And when he saw me reading Carl Sandburg's life of Lincoln, this screwball almost went nuts.

"Lincoln was shot because he shoulda been shot," he hollered. "Free the slaves? Nuts! He freed them so he could put them in competition with the white workingman and start wars. He started the Civil War, didn't he? I'll tip you off, Herman. What was the Civil War fought for anyway? It was to make more dough for Rockefeller and Morgan."

I had to laugh. "You lug, those guys had just about got over wetting their pants when the Civil War was fought."

"Sure, just a nice age for the Army. But did they carry any muskets? No, by God!" He stuck his chin out and scowled at me. "I'm wise to you. You're probably in their pay."

DYNAMITE CARGO

"Who—Morgan and Rockefeller? If I was I wouldn't be here."

"O.K.," he leered. "I get it," and he grinned very craftily.

It might sound ridiculous, but it drove me wild. The only reason I did not hang one on the Salesman's chin was because he was twice my age and about half my size. Once I did grab him and close him up like a jackknife. I bent his head down between his knees until his back cracked. When I let him go he was livid. If he had had a gun on him he would have shot me.

I found out something about Willy. We had a portable phonograph in the crew's mess, with a lot of old records, mostly by Ted Lewis. Willy used to hang around when he was off watch and if nobody else was playing the phonograph he would. His favorite record was *I Left My Love in Avalon*. . . . We got sick of hearing it.

One night I was playing the portable, jigging around and snapping my fingers, not out of any high spirits but just to keep my mind off the general situation. The weather had turned foul again, foggy and cold. The *Jason* rolled steadily in long, oily

DYNAMITE CARGO

swells. In one corner of the mess room some of the guys were playing Red Dog and Willy sat doing nothing, with his usual dead pan. I sashayed past him and gave him a whack on the back to cheer him up. A phonograph record went spinning out of his hands. He had been sitting there holding it, evidently thinking about asking me to put it on. It crashed on the deck, busting into half a dozen pieces. Willy sat there looking at them. Then he got up, gave his trousers a hitch, and went out. I picked up the pieces. One of the men playing Red Dog said, "Hey, Herman, what the hell? We oughta fine you the price of a record. What was it?"

I told him. One of the others said, "Thank God!" They went back to their game. I felt like a heel. Finally I went down to Willy's room and as I opened the door he shoved something under a folded blanket on his berth. So I pretended I was going to sit down on the blanket, and Willy snaked the article out again. It was a tinted photograph in one of these painted gilt frames.

"Nice-looking babe," I said casually.

He grinned and turned pink and let me look at it then. She *was* a nice-looking babe. She was probably about nineteen and she had got herself dressed like

DYNAMITE CARGO

a turkey for roasting for the photograph. She wasn't what you would call a babe, though. She had blue eyes and her expression made me feel funny in a vague kind of way—kind of homesick. Willy had met her in Texas. Once he got started talking on the subject, there was no shutting him off. He showed me a small stack of letters and post cards, tied up in a piece of cord, which he had got from her. He hadn't told her that he was going to Russia but he figured on getting back and taking the train down to Texas and surprising her with the dough he had made and getting married. Her name was Rosalind. She had a job in Galveston—in some hash house named The Avalon.

Our gun crew spent most of its time drilling and greasing and putting around its armament. I had the feeling that they did not know a hell of a lot about it. These boys did not impress me too highly. They were mostly kids like Swanson, an ex-Wisconsin soda jerk who had never been to sea before, not even on Lake Michigan. Swanson told me he had enlisted in the Navy without any idea of where he would be sent. After a period at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station he had suddenly found

DYNAMITE CARGO

himself in a gun crew on a munitions carrier. The only shooting he had ever done was with a .20-gauge shotgun. He was seventeen.

Ensign Hawley, his boss, was around twenty-eight. He was no Annapolis man. He had been educated in a southern Methodist college and was going to a theological seminary when war was declared. He used to read his Bible regularly after meals. I tried to kid him by asking how he squared fighting with religion. The war was a holy war, he declared, because Hitler and his Nazis were avowed pagans.

"I have no personal hatred of them. But I believe with all my faith that if a projectile fired by me or by my orders hits a Nazi I am doing my Maker's work."

"Do you think you're likely to get back from this trip alive?" I asked him.

"That will be as God wills it."

He made me nervous. This fatalistic point of view did not seem to be the proper attitude for a Navy gun crew commander. We had to depend somewhat on the preacher and his soda jerk for protection. I got this idea over to him. He was a large-boned man with intense blue eyes and a set, intense

DYNAMITE CARGO

expression. "We are all in God's hands," he said shortly.

The harbor by now had become a small city of big gray hulls, high stacks and towering masts. On their decks and in their holds were hundreds and hundreds of thousands of tons of war matériel. The Germans would never let anything like this get through to Russia, I told Scotty, who agreed with me.

Our only diversion was rowing around to the other ships and visiting. You could pick up any kind of talk you wanted to listen to. The scare stories that circulated around gave you the jitters. Rumor was as thick as the late summer fogs which rolled in from the sea and hung incessantly over our cold, crowded harbor.

One of the stories was that the Nazis had a new and terrific pocket battleship. It had been in operation all summer, according to the story, and had taken an awful toll of Allied shipping around England. The Admiralty had suppressed reports of it, fearing that seamen would get discouraged.

Another yarn was that we were actually bottled up here. We were not able to get through a cordon of U-boats which had already been spread around

DYNAMITE CARGO

the harbor entrance, and one fine night a force of German planes would come over and simply blast us out of the water. Another rumor had us going to the Mediterranean and not Russia at all. That story started more tongues wagging than any of them. Seamen the world over had come to dislike the Mediterranean. It was "Death Valley."

There were stories, seemingly well authenticated, of the last big convoy the Allies had punched through to Murmansk. It was in July and the losses among merchant ships had been terrible. Ours was to be an even bigger show. Presumably the Nazis' efforts to destroy us would be that much bigger too. There were no illusions about our getting through without being detected. We would be attacked just as sure as tomorrow would dawn.

There were stories of German ruthlessness, of U-boat crews lining up along their deck and laughing at merchant seamen as they froze to death in the Arctic, of planes strafing men as they floated in the sea.

Anchored among us was a big, white hospital ship. One of the ugliest rumors was that some of her patients were men who had faked sickness so they could get paid off and sent home. Scotty, Willy and

DYNAMITE CARGO

I, and some others were rowing back to the *Jason* and we passed under the hospital ship's broad stern. She was not going to Archangel, she was staying right here. I remember asking Scotty, "How much dough have we got coming to us as of this date?" and Scotty saying, "Around a thousand bucks." I flicked the butt of a cigarette into the water and cast a glance around, wondering if any of the fellows were thinking what I was thinking. One and all they were gazing at the hospital ship. Willy sat with his head cocked up at her high sides, on his dull face the same expression which he had probably worn when his uncle discovered the dead horses.

That morning we got word that we were getting under way.

It was late in the afternoon and growing dark fast. I was on lookout when it came the *Jason's* turn to thread through the mines and nets at the mouth of the harbor.

The merchantmen were in a double column that stretched as far as I could see. On our flanks were the warships, steaming along in perfect alignment.

According to the First Officer it was the biggest

DYNAMITE CARGO

naval escort the British had ever assembled. Whether it was or not, it was a magnificent spectacle. There were cruisers, one of them flying the Commodore's broad pennant, destroyer leaders and destroyers, a small aircraft carrier, mine sweepers, submarines, and corvettes, which are smaller than destroyers, fast and lightly armed.

Four of the warships were on our port quarter as we moved out to sea in the fading lemon-yellow twilight. The British ensigns stood straight out from their gaffs. Sharp prows cut long, white curling furrows. I admired the ingenuity of the Englishmen's camouflage. The Salesman had sneered at them as "sissy" ships. Watching from the *Jason's* crow's-nest, I discovered the camouflage was effective. It would have been impossible for me to have got a gun range. And as the twilight grew thicker and the colors of sea and sky washed out, the ships became ghostly wraiths in the blur and finally vanished.

It was scarcely dark when we had an alert. This is it already, we thought. We jumped to our stations. Somewhere in the night we suddenly saw the bright flashes of anti-aircraft guns and heard their sharp explosions. We waited nervously, listening for the

DYNAMITE CARGO

drum of planes. Minutes went by, and then from the warships came signal flares advising us that it was only practice.

They intended to keep us on our toes. Requiring us to form convoy in the darkness was a test in itself. I doubt if a ship's captain among us had ever taken part in such elaborate maneuvers, and navigating blind and in strange waters was a formidable assignment. I think the British Commodore planned it that way deliberately. We might as well get used to maneuvering under difficult conditions. We had to learn our lessons before we were under attack. It would be too late then for rehearsals.

The British, I understand, had figured out some new techniques after the disasters of an earlier convoy. Ours was a kind of guinea-pig trip. They drilled us for three days, while the weather held firm, and we plowed on towards the Arctic. As signals whipped up and down from the flagship, we swung wide and swung together, we fanned out and squeezed back. We fouled the sky with our black smoke and streaked the ocean with our curlicue wakes. We had firing practice with blank cartridges.

The merchant seamen, the Commodore ordered, were to be instructed in the use of the ship's arma-

DYNAMITE CARGO

ment. That was so we would know how to take over if any of the Navy gun crew got knocked off. Some of the men, particularly the Salesman, beefed at all the activity. Personally I liked it. I think they did too. It relieved the suspense.

The fourth day, the barometer dropped and hit bottom. I was in the wheelhouse taking my orders from the Old Man in person when it began to blow right out of the Arctic Ocean. The gray water was suddenly lashed with white. Almost broadside to the squall, we rolled and lifted, slid sickeningly up and down the great waves rolling in on us.

I have been in worse blows, but never so far north. The wind seemed to have an extraordinary solidity. What worried us was our deck cargo. We were a full-powered and ably-found ship, but the kind of all-dead-weight cargo we carried above our hatches is inevitably risky business.

In ordinary circumstances we would have put the ship into the eye of the wind. A vessel will roll just so far, ordinarily, and then she will right herself. How far over she will go depends on her metacentric height, which is something like the center of her balance. She is all right unless her cargo shifts. Then the careful calculations of her designers become

DYNAMITE CARGO

worthless. If we had to hold this course carrying a shifting, bulky cargo, we would surer than hell capsize. In the eye of the wind we would be better off. She would pitch and dive and shake her guts out, but under careful management she would not be likely to turn over. The difficulty was, we were expected to keep on our course and maintain our assigned position in the convoy.

If we eased her, we might crash into another laboring merchantman and all go to glory together. It was pitch black. Night had come with the storm.

The Old Man worried plenty about the wire cables which lashed the tanks and cases of airplane parts to the deck. He sent one of the mates forward to make an inspection. The mate, a fellow named Lafferty, came aft again lurching heavily with the ship's roll and reported that the lashings had indeed slackened off, probably some four inches. I don't know what good it did the Old Man to know it. He didn't dare send anyone to try to take up the slack. In the dark and with the bitter cold and with water breaking over our sides, it was too risky a job. Someone could make a slip and one of the tanks might take charge. A runaway tank on that heaving deck would have been something.

DYNAMITE CARGO

Minute after minute new noises were added to the growing motif of stress and strain that sounded through the storm's roaring symphony. The steel cargo booms had been lashed upright against the masts to make room for the deck cargo. Working loose from their jury lashings, they began to clang-clang. Tools and accessories packed inside the tanks shook loose and rattled around like dice in a box, crashing and banging against the tanks' metal sides. The lifeboat gear groaned. The boats were swung out, as they always are in convoy.

Through the speaking tube came the Chief Engineer's voice, "We are losing suction alongside." He had hardly spoken when the *Jason* rolled over for what I thought was going to be the last time. An empty coffee mug bounced across the wheelhouse. The mate yelled that the forward fall of No. 3 lifeboat had carried away and that the boat was hanging from its stern davit. Then No. 3 boat was gone, swept overboard. The Old Man had had enough. He signaled we were out of control. From somewhere in the darkness one of the warships indicated that we could bring the *Jason* into the wind a little. . . .

Spoke by spoke I brought her up, as the Old Man

DYNAMITE CARGO

cautioned me. My impulse was to roll the wheel over, which might have put the *Jason's* nose under and ended her career. It seemed to me that the squall eased up almost immediately. I know my nerves eased. The rolling became more of a weaving motion, with a solid buck and pitch. The Old Man gruntingly bent down and picked up the coffee mug, finally left the bridge to Lafferty, and stamped into his quarters. I think he would have liked to have been back in Texas. Personally, I thought he could have hoisted the out-of-control signal sooner. But apparently he had made up his mind long since to see this thing through in the manner prescribed. I think the Old Man wanted to show some of the young chaps commanding the British escort that he could take it.

The sea had moderated appreciably by dawn. In the day's first light we saw eight or nine other merchantmen. Near by was a little corvette, pooping along, very businesslike. She must have had a boisterous night, however. Everything so far looked to be under control. One thing the squall had done—for a while it had taken our minds off Nazi raiders.

Chapter Five

RUSSIAN-BOUND CONVOYS in those days followed a circuitous route and put into Murmansk or, as we intended, into the White Sea and Archangel.

We sighted land broad off our starboard beam. The sinking northern sun had transformed an ice-sheathed coast into towering glass mountains of pink, yellow, orange, blue and blue-green. Preston Nickerson, one of the Gloucestermen, spat a streak of tobacco juice over the rail and informed me: "Thrifty sort of place. Not any colder'n New York, or nohow Boston. Come Christmas or New Year's, I won't say. Right now it ain't anyway cold to speak of."

DYNAMITE CARGO

It was as cold as I wanted that September evening. I took a look at the ocean which had picked up some colors of the sunset. It still looked cold. I had heard about men jumping overboard from sinking ships into the Arctic Ocean. Sixty minutes was as long as you could expect to survive, even clothed in one of the special rubber suits we had, which were lined with wool and cotton insulation. Some people said a man could last an hour and a half, but I think they were optimists. You wouldn't stay conscious even sixty minutes. But if you were picked up inside of that time you might be brought around.

Maybe I should have thought of all this back in the U. S. A.

Nickerson slacked off his jaw and brushed his chin with the back of his hand. "Any day now we'll get ours. There ain't been much about it in the papers, but I figger no more'n a ninth or a tenth of the stuff we're sendin' the Rooshians gets there."

I didn't believe him. I was sure that the percentage was a lot higher than that. I said to Nickerson: "Where do you get your information?"

"I figger it out. The way wars are run nowadays, that percentage is all right. Right nice percentage."

DYNAMITE CARGO

He was too damn lugubrious. I moved on. "We'll get it any day now," he shouted after me.

Two days went by and we hadn't got it yet. We had daily drills and practice alerts. Though the Salesman raised his voice against the idea, the crew voted on its own initiative to stand watches of four hours on and four off. The Salesman said we were sacrificing a union gain and would regret it. We zigzagged constantly on a prearranged course, taking our cues from the escort vessels. We were blacked out. We felt most secure during the hours of darkness, but they only lasted from about 11 P.M. to around two or three in the morning at this time of year.

It was a Saturday evening. I went below and stretched out on my berth. I had the steering trick at midnight and I thought I would grab a little nap. But I couldn't sleep. I was reading Sandburg's Lincoln when Scotty came down and began moving his gear around, whistling through his teeth. "Pipe down," I snapped at him.

He quit whistling and said we had received the signal that we were to fire on anything that looked irregular.

Scotty kept puttingter about. "For God's sake,

DYNAMITE CARGO

light somewhere," I snarled at him, and tried to concentrate on Sandburg.

Scotty began snarling back, "This place would look like a monkey house—" and stopped. We both heard it—the bark of a gun.

Scotty straightened up from stowing a bag under his berth. We looked at each other. I got up and followed Scotty onto the deck, both of us listening and hearing nothing but the thud-thud of the engines and the familiar creaks and groans which the *Jason* made when she was under way. Then another gun spoke, and another. We headed for the deck.

We were in time to see two bright flashes away up at the head of our formation. Then, from one of the navy ships, an anti-aircraft cut loose in a prolonged rattle. There was silence again.

Nickerson had been out on deck when the first cannon sounded. He told me without excitement that he had heard the drum of a single plane and then the rumble of a number of them. "Scoutin', I reckon. But there's no use in losin' sleep over it. They won't be back before daylight."

He was probably right. They wouldn't attack before there was some light on the sea. They were just

DYNAMITE CARGO

checking our position. They would come back tomorrow.

The Old Man and the First and the Second were all on the bridge. "Mind your steering," the Old Man said to me. He had a pair of night glasses and he kept moving from one side to another, staring out. I kept my eyes on the only spot of light in the wheelhouse, the glowing compass card in the blue-lit binnacle.

It was a long trick but I was sorry when it was over. From now on there would be nothing to do but wait around in idleness. Having nothing to do was the worst part of it. I went back below. Scotty was asleep. I lay down in my berth and, believe it or not, I went right to sleep.

It was around six o'clock, as I remember, when the bells began to jangle like all the bells in hell.

We had been through this before in practice. We went to our stations automatically, beating our hands together and lifting our rigid faces to the sky. An icy wind whipped our breaths away. Spread across the leaden ocean were the ships of our convoy, some of them hull down on the horizon.

From a plane, the merchantmen in our convoy would be seen plodding along in six or seven long

DYNAMITE CARGO

columns, with the screen of destroyers and corvettes on the parade's flanks. The flagship *Scylla* was in the center of the whole formation, with two of the cargo ships just astern of her, two just ahead. The small aircraft carrier was in the rear of our vast convoy. There she would have room to maneuver and put her nose in the wind when she wanted to get her planes off. Now the destroyers and corvettes were breaking their alignment, fanning out, closing in, flipping the water in high-flying spray. We were all zigzagging, so that you never had the same ship off your beam for very long.

My station was at one of the 20-mm. cannon on the starboard side, in the bow, standing by, ready to move in if needed. It was a gray day with an overcast, a ceiling, I judged, of about 2,000 feet. I was calculating this when I heard the explosion.

Most of us had expected an air attack. It was mostly wishful thinking—if they came by air the merchantmen would have a chance of cracking back at them. We thought at first that the explosion was from the cannon of a cruiser off to the southwest. Then we saw the ship, which was astern of us and in the same column, belch smoke from her hull. She was a Russian, a big girl with a high, broad bow.

DYNAMITE CARGO

Ensign Hawley had just appeared to check up on the green crew. "She's been torpedoed, I think," he said. "We're being attacked by U-boats."

Already, incredibly, she was listing. We could see people running along her decks. They looked orderly enough but in a great hurry. They were lowering their boats, which filled with people almost the instant they hit the water. She was settling visibly. Thick, white steam gushed out of her stack. The ocean around her was covered with boats, debris, men. Women too, probably. We had seen women sailors among the Russian crews when we were waiting at the rendezvous in the bleak harbor.

All we could do was watch in fascination. We held our course, getting farther and farther away from the stricken vessel. The merchantmen in a convoy cannot stop. Rescue work, if it is possible, is left to the warships. Several destroyers were racing for the spot. A corvette crossed our bows, lurching through the sea and dropping depth charges as she went. We rocked with their detonations.

Then another ship got it.

This one was an American. She was astern of the sinking Russian. We knew she had been hit by the way she lurched to port, then rolled back again,

DYNAMITE CARGO

listing heavily to starboard. She stayed afloat. But her engines must have been knocked out because she lost way almost immediately. For all practical purposes she was as dead as the Russian.

We learned later that they had to shell her to sink her. She was a Liberty ship like the *Jason*. They did not want to leave her there for the Germans and it was no good trying to tow her. A tow would have been a sitting duck for the first German plane, and two ships would have been lost in trying to save one.

There were several miles of ocean by now between the *Jason* and the two casualties. All we could see, without glasses, was a forgathering of vessels and over it all a black and gray cloud that rolled away southwards. Presently we could see that the Russian had vanished.

It had all happened inside of a few minutes. I found out later how the U-boats had got past the destroyers. The submarines must have been waiting for us with engines shut off so they wouldn't be picked up by detectors. When the escort screen had passed over them they got the merchantmen in their periscopes or on their sound apparatus, and let go with torpedoes. We hoped to God that the

DYNAMITE CARGO

British got some of them. Destroyers and corvettes were still racing around, dropping depth charges. We zigzagged on.

Swanson the Navy kid had the 20-mm. gun to which I was assigned. He leaned back against the strap, nervously beating his hands against his legs. I lighted a cigarette and noted that my hands were steady, pretty steady. I tried to recapture some of the assurance that I had felt in port, after our second collision when we all went around telling each other that now we were immune, we had had all the hard luck that was coming to us. Hawley walked aft. The Old Man came out on the flying bridge, his nose blue, his shoulders hunched up, his head in a knitted cap, turning first one way then another.

It was at that moment that the signal came that we were being attacked by planes.

We heard the drum-drum of a plane, possibly several planes. They were out of sight, way up above the overcast. But abruptly an eruption of water off our port bow showed where one of them had let go a bomb, plopping it down through the clouds.

Swanson's hands fumbled with the mechanism and his childlike face lifted to the sky with an expression of frustration. The Germans were headed

DYNAMITE CARGO

away from us, the direction of their attack marked by the sprouting of huge black and white cabbages across the surface of the gray ocean.

This was high-level bombing. It made us sore. They were yellow. Why didn't they come down, the bastards, where we could see them? Several of the warships opened up with futile ack-ack fire. The bombing, though nerve-racking, was just as futile. Minute after minute went by as the cabbages continued to sprout. No ships were struck. Finally the bombers were gone. From the flagship came the all-clear.

We learned later what their idea was. They were trying to split us up, scare some of our cargo ships out of the convoy, then run them down later. They had worked that trick on another convoy. Nazi surface raiders took a terrible toll after the planes had broken up the parade. But we stuck together, like kittens in a basket, and zigzagged along according to orders.

It was not a question of the Nazis being yellow either. We found that out almost immediately. The high-level bombers had scarcely drummed out of hearing when we heard more aircraft approaching from another quarter. Their racket became a roar.

DYNAMITE CARGO

They broke out of the overcast, half a hundred Heinkel 111's fanning out across the convoy. But only two interested us. One trailing the other, they had plummeted down, come out of their dives, and were heading straight for the *Jason*. They were scarcely higher than our deck, until the leader abruptly lifted his nose and thundered over us. I saw one torpedo drop.

It must have missed us. But we scarcely had time to note it. No. 2 plane was on us. I ducked down on the deck beside Swanson. I realized for the first time that he had the 20 mm. in action. The kid's face was as white as a sheet. The gun's orange tracers caught the German. Bursting shells ripped the plane's wing. It swerved away from us, wabbling crazily, while Swanson's 20 mm. and the other 20 mm. in the *Jason*'s bow followed and held it, and a stream of fire chewed up its belly and literally tore it to pieces in midair. What was left of the Heinkel flopped and crashed into the sea.

Swanson kept on firing. His gun was pointed at the empty sky. Hawley came running. "Cut it," he yelled above the din. "You're wasting ammunition."

Swanson paid no attention. His hands were

DYNAMITE CARGO

frozen to the gun's action and he hung there bucking up and down with the gun's recoil.

The preacher grabbed his hands and yanked them loose. "Unstrap him," he ordered me. "He's gone off his head."

"He's doing all right," I told Hawley.

"Unstrap him and take over."

I did as the preacher ordered. It was something else to drag the kid free. He fought. He kicked. He sobbed out: "Leave me be. I got the son of a bitch, didn't I? Didn't you see the son of a bitch go down?"

"Snap out of it," Hawley hollered.

But the kid was fighting crazy. He crawled around the gun turret, staring out at the place where the Heinkel had crashed, pointing and shouting incoherently. We never saw a sign of the Heinkel's crew. The preacher finally got Swanson out of the turret. Obviously he would be no good until he calmed down.

Hawley asked one of the Cape Verde Negroes to take the kid down to his quarters. The Negro took the little soda jerk under the arm, half lifted him from his feet and dragged him away.

I got in behind the gun. But the Germans were departing. They were ducking up into the overcast

DYNAMITE CARGO

again, making tracks for the coast of Norway. We had gotten a number of them. I saw their wreckage. They had gotten a number of us, too. How many I am not allowed to say. But the smoke of their fires raised a black pall that marked our slow and terrible course across the northern sea.

Chapter Six

WE HAD ANOTHER attack that day before the short hours of darkness shut down. At dusk, torpedo bombers reappeared in the south, swooping on us again like hawks out of the overcast. I was at the 20 mm., but the *Jason* was not in the path of their first onslaught and I had a couple of minutes to watch their technique.

They came in diving steeply, one after another, in a long single file, then fanning out and heading for the flank of our formation and just a few feet above the waves. They hopped over the destroyer screen on our starboard hand and were in among us, hardly ever more than mast high, sometimes only

DYNAMITE CARGO

deck high. Men in the crow's-nest of the cargo ships could look down on them.

They went through us weaving like basketball players dribbling across a court, spewing at us with small cannon fire from their noses and undersides, plastering the area with bombs. As they banked on their turns, careening along the side of a vessel almost at right angles to the water, they let go their torpedoes.

They were Heinkel 111's and Junkers 88's, heavy bombers with twin Daimler-Benz engines, according to the British. The British told us later that they had racks improvised in the forward end of the fuselage to carry the torpedoes—two deadly 18-inch tin fish. The British said that it was the first time the Nazis had used these types of planes and this form of attack against the North Cape convoys.

The Nazis took punishment. Time after time you would see a big bird suddenly go to pieces and flop down like a shot duck—or gush forth a plume of black smoke and go screeching nose first into the ocean. They burned up in their own flames, or floated a while, until the waves swept over and swallowed up the wreckage. The British ships picked up a few of the crews.

DYNAMITE CARGO

The British had their techniques too. The wall of fire which the escort vessels raised around us seemed impenetrable. Black shell bursts filled the air. Frequently, instead of aiming point-blank, the British gunners depressed their Oerlikons, skipped their shells across the water and up under the bellies of the low-flying Nazis. From the aircraft carrier, Sea Hurricanes hurried across the low sky, stabbing and harassing. These British fighters were a version of the land-based Hurricanes. They were reckless and utterly unconcerned about their own chances of survival. Unfortunately they were outnumbered, sometimes even as much as seven or eight to one.

I never got a crack at the Germans that evening. I let a few rounds go at one plane but it was climbing fast, ducking back up into the overcast. I don't believe any of the *Jason's* guns, which all squirted at him, touched him.

All the Nazis were clambering up into the clouds now. That attack was over. But it was not the end of the day's excitement. We were warned to watch for mines. Some of the Germans had dropped a sowing of them across our path. On orders from the *Scylla* we altered our course sharply, hoping that the British had correctly estimated the drift.

DYNAMITE CARGO

When the short night came down around us, we did not feel as secure as we usually did in the darkness. Every black wave that rolled up under us and broke into pale white foam that swished softly along our sides might carry a bobbing can of dynamite. But apparently the British had figured correctly.

We lost track of time. I remember coming off my trick at the wheel, going down to my quarters, and getting out a pint of whisky. I took a big slug and lay down. I thought of the Old Man. I don't think he had had more than twelve hours of sleep since we left our last port in the Western Hemisphere. If he had slept at all since the attacks began, it was only an occasional cat nap, sitting up in a swivel chair in his quarters abaft the bridge. But he was imperturbable, moving around in his customary deliberate way, grunting when he had to stoop over for something, scarcely opening his mouth except to croak an order. The mates, Lafferty and a Down-East Yankee named Sewell, were a lot more keyed up than the Old Man. They probably had more to think about, such as young wives back on the East Coast. Sewell had a daughter in high school studying the violin. She was in the high school orchestra, he told me. The Old Man only had the ship. But

DYNAMITE CARGO

he had already had two ships shot out from under him. The old lady he had left behind probably could make out all right. There was the ranch in Texas. I wondered how Willy was doing. He was stationed at one of the after guns. Rosalind's letters would be piling up at the shipping company office in New York, if Rosalind did not get discouraged and quit writing. It was funny to think of Willy as the guy who "left my love in Avalon." I finally dropped off to sleep.

The bells brought me out of it. I never had any trouble waking up when they went off, though some of the crew did. They used to sleep right through, dead to the world. Black Tom, our wild-eyed Negro chief cook, and his mess boys had to rush through the fo'c'sle turning them out. Some of the other fellows were going nutty from the almost constant jangling of the alarm bells. So a few of them took to sleeping at their stations on deck, wrapped up in their rubber suits. Some of the engine room crew slept out on deck too. After four hours' watch down below the waterline, surrounded by tons of machinery and thousands of pounds of imprisoned steam, crawling up and down manholes and wriggling in and out of alleyways, oiling propeller shafts

DYNAMITE CARGO

and so on, and listening to the thud of depth charges in the water around, and wondering when a torpedo was going to burst in their midst or a bomb come plunging down, it was no wonder that they preferred the deck when they were off watch. It was a job that made me feel squeamish just to think about. When I die I want to die in the open air.

The Germans were still out of sight up in the clouds, but on the way. We could hear them. Swanson was back at the 20 mm., standing there wheeling the gun's thin snout around and scanning the sky with a very cool and professional air. He had gotten over his heebie-jeebies. He was as cool as a fish in a tub of ice.

The coxswain of the crew on the ack-ack cannon on our fo'c'sle head spotted me. He was short a man. One of his crew had been winged the day before by a stray bullet from a Nazi machine gun. But Ensign Hawley appeared and told Swanson to take over the fo'c'sle head gun. "Swanson's a trained gunner," Hawley told the cox. "Herman has the hang of the 20." So I took Swanson's place again.

The sea was flat. The day was windless, dull.

This time it was a high and low level attack, al-

DYNAMITE CARGO

ternating. The wave-skipping Heinkels and Junkers came first, swooping and shifting and weaving as always. They were concentrating on the first line of ships in the formation. They came down, released their torpedoes and climbed up again, so they were up in the low protecting clouds by the time the first tin fish which they had released found their marks. One after another, then, the ships in that line began to go. It was sickening, like watching a slaughter. You could guess their cargoes by the sound of the explosions and the color of the smoke that belched up. Most of them were munitions carriers like the *Jason*. Some of them went up with a long-drawn-out whoosh. It was too far away for us to see them clearly. The scene was all in miniature, but no less terrifying. I beheld fragments of ships rise into the sky with each successive explosion. The pieces seemed to hang suspended on high for a moment before they fell back into the smoke and flame spreading out on the sea. The whole first row of the formation was destroyed, while the rest of us steamed on, passed through their acrid smoke, plowed by their drifting wreckage. Mine sweepers tore around looking for survivors. I don't think there were many.

DYNAMITE CARGO

The Nazis were down on us again, operating in our neighborhood now. I froze onto the gun's action, probably firing aimlessly, with excitement scalding the whole inside of me. It was almost impossible to draw a bead on one of them. You would get one in your sights and another would come with a sudden express train roar from another direction, pass you before you could swing your gun onto it.

There was a short surcease from the dive bombers and the high-level bombing began. Down came their eggs, up sprouted the vast black and gray cabbages of water. Again they did little or no damage that I could see. It was a device to confuse us, distract our escorts. Neither purpose was served. We followed the flagship's signals, steering by her directions, altering course when she ordered.

Back came the basketball players. They got another Liberty ship this time. She was broad off our beam. Three Junkers pounced on her all at once and they must have opened her wide in several places because she began to go down at the head. In no time at all her bow was half under, her tail sticking up towards the sky. We saw some figures way up there by the taffrail, silhouetted against the clouds. A corvette was standing by, taking the crew

DYNAMITE CARGO

off. Everyone appeared to be cool about it, as the Russian crew had been the day before. They might have been excursionists disembarking for a picnic. They had a rope ladder over the side and were climbing down it into the corvette. We could see the captain coming down last. Everything was ship-shape and Bristol fashion. Then a Heinkel swooped on them. A yell went up from our deck. The Heinkel was spraying the survivors with machine gun fire. The corvette's guns crackled. We saw the man on the ladder just ahead of the skipper drop a bag he was carrying, lurch as though he had slipped, and fall like a sack onto the deck of the corvette.

The Nazis' vindictiveness, which seemed so personal, bewildered me. My own feeling at first was hatred for the Heinkels and Junkers. But I did not have any particular hatred for the men operating them. I didn't give them much thought. What did they have against me personally, a guy from Fayetteville, New York? They were guys from Oberamergau or Dresden or some other German town. They were boys, I figured, I might have run into before the war in a Buenos Aires water-front bar. Blond kids with faces like Willy, drinking beer. I found out something later which made the vindic-

DYNAMITE CARGO

tiveness of these Nazi fliers even harder to understand. They were not all Germans. Some of them were Norwegians, Belgians, Finns, Danes.

There was not much time for a soliloquy. We were having trouble again. Three of them were coming plumb at the *Jason* now, probably two miles off. That is, about thirty seconds away.

But they made two mistakes. Flying so close together, low and flat out, they made a target you couldn't miss. Second, they flew directly over a little, snub-nosed freighter just ahead of us. They had picked us. It was no business of Snub-Nose to interfere. But she did. She opened up with two guns on her bow when the Nazis were right over her. One of the Heinkels on the outside faltered, rolled on her side, and rocketed down into the sea. It disconcerted the other two. They veered off and the one in the middle came directly in my sights. It was so close I could see the pilot's face grinning at me. A 20 mm. throws seven projectiles a second about the size of the shank of an old-fashioned telephone. They explode in the air in half a dozen pieces. All the *Jason*'s bow guns on both sides were rattling. The other Nazi dropped a bomb. The *Jason* rocked crazily in the explosion and for an instant I thought

DYNAMITE CARGO

we had been hit. A wall of water shot up and cascaded over us. I would have been knocked down but for the harness and the grip I had on the gun. I saw several men go sprawling, then I saw one of the Heinkels floundering in the waves. The other had rushed on.

Whether it was I who had hit the Heinkel I could not say. I know that for a split second I had him full in my sights.

The *Jason* was unscathed. She steamed steadily on. We came up on the sinking wreckage of the Heinkel which Snub-Nose had downed and saw that a solitary Nazi airman had crawled out on one of the uplifted wings. He waved at us peremptorily. By his manner you would have thought that it was our duty to rescue this insolent soldier of the *Herrenvolk*. One of the Navy boys rushed to the rail and shook his fist, shouting: "Go to hell, you Nazi bastard!"

Ensign Hawley overheard. "That will do," he ordered. "It is not ours to judge and dispose. God disposes."

I guess that God disposed of that Nazi. It was beyond any power of ours anyhow. We could not stop. Maybe one of the mine sweepers picked the guy up.

DYNAMITE CARGO

The arrogance of these Nazis who strafed crews as they were leaving their ships and then expected us to pick them up when we shot them down enraged us. My first impersonal feelings had completely gone. I wanted to see these Nazi kids slain, not just their planes destroyed. I resented them. What right did they have to kill me?

We saw another big Russian ship get it. She was one we remembered well from the convoy rendezvous in the British Isles. About half her crew were women. We saw them going over the side and saw the Junkers, that had made the hit, bank, circle and dive in on the survivors, the guns in its nose and underside all chattering. A destroyer a quarter of a mile away must have turned everything she had on the Nazi. It folded up like an old umbrella and crashed. We set up a cheer and heard cheering from the tanker on our starboard hand. The *Scylla* ran up flags signaling "good work."

We felt a wave of elation every time one of them went down. Even when a Nazi parachutist, who had bailed out somewhere above the overcast, came floating down through the clouds, and the gunners on a merchantman got the range and cut him to pieces and kept firing at him until his dangling

DYNAMITE CARGO

body was nothing but a bloody rag when it hit the sea, we felt no horror.

I was watching this sight when a lucky—or rather, I should say, extremely unlucky—bomb from one of the high-level operators got the tanker next to us. It was not a particularly loud explosion. But the noise seemed to suck all sound and life and motion into it. It sucked the breath from our lungs. Where the long, flat-sided gray tanker had been a moment before there was now a pillar of flaming gas that was like the breath of a blast furnace. Lucky for us no wind ruffled the Arctic Ocean that day. If it had, and had blown that holocaust our way, we would have been cremated as we stood there.

We got our breaths back, feeling nauseated. There was nothing we could do but hold our course. There were no survivors of the inferno. Death was at least sudden for them, though there must have been an agonized last instant.

The pillar of flame sank, spread out in a great, swirling fiery lake in the middle of the ocean. There was no sign of the tanker any more. She must have sunk like a stone. For miles, as we crept on, we could still see the flickering brilliance of her pyre. For many more miles we could see the column of black

DYNAMITE CARGO

smoke curling upward and seeping into the overcast.

The all-clear signal came. We relaxed, sinking down against the gun shields. Two of Black Tom's mess boys appeared on deck carrying trays of chicken salad sandwiches, fruit cocktails in paper cups and big pots of coffee. Throughout the action the galley crew had stayed below, probably scared to death, chopping up chickens, mixing up the salad, opening cans of fruit.

We were impressed and grateful, believe me. We hollered for Black Tom. He came up grinning and bowing. He was a profane old Florida Negro with a voice like a trombone. "Eat it up, gemmen," he bellowed. "If any of them sonsabitches sends us to hell this aft'noon the devil will have to admit we was all livin' high."

We discovered that we had had four casualties, but all minor ones: the Navy gunner who had been winged the day before; one of the engine room crew who had got a slight scald from escaping steam; one of the ordinaries who had wrenched his leg leaping over some of the deck cargo when he thought he saw one of the German gunners drawing a direct bead on him; and a fourth man who had

DYNAMITE CARGO

been grazed in the head by a machine gun bullet and carried below for dead. When they laid him out he sat up and asked for some whisky.

The *Jason* was a lucky ship. We began to laugh and make corny jokes. After what we had seen and been through we figured we were unbelievably well off. Nickerson, the Gloucesterman, cracked that we weren't "to Archangel yet" and we bawled him down. They wouldn't get the *Jason*. She sailed under a lucky star.

We sobered up some when we began to hear the dull reverberations of depth charges, and we stared across the ocean which was fading out now in the Arctic night. But we couldn't believe that we were in for another attack. Scotty was coming towards me, stumping along on his bowlegs. He called to me something that I didn't get. Just then the alarms rang. Whether it was my imagination or not, they seemed to have a special insistence. They were still jangling when the *Jason* shook all through, as though she had run aground. From her amidships compartment came a dull, grinding detonation, then an explosion which hurled me up against the deckhouse. All the bells in hell were really jangling now.

Chapter Seven

IT WAS NOT a dead silence. It was full of mumbled confusion. Seconds went by before I realized that the bump-bump of the *Jason's* engines, which long since had become as familiar as my own breathing, had stopped. That was what made the silence seem so profound.

Scotty was already picking himself up and running towards the midships companionway. I ran after him. Men were crowded around the steep iron steps which led down into the hold. I could not actually see them in the pitch darkness but I could hear them. I got what had happened. A torpedo had

DYNAMITE CARGO

struck us, pierced the *Jason's* steel plates and exploded in the engine room. They were checking up on who was missing. Someone broke out a pocket flash and half a dozen pale, strained faces leaped out of the darkness, among them the Chief Engineer's. They were bringing a man up the narrow companionway, passing him along from hand to hand. A couple of men carried him away. The Chief and several of the others immediately went below.

From the *Jason's* hold came a low hiss and the sound of water washing through her opened side. Most of the black gang had escaped by a freak. They had heard an explosion which they never did identify, but which they recognized as some kind of new and ominous sound. Nervous as rabbits after hours of listening to depth charges going off in the sea, they had jumped as a man for the ladders. When, almost immediately afterwards, a torpedo did tear through the *Jason's* steel plates, most of the men were already scrambling up. That was their story. An oiler swore that he glanced back and saw the torpedo strike its war head against a cylinder head and had actually seen it explode.

The fellow who was hurt had been standing at

DYNAMITE CARGO

the foot of the ladder and had been struck in the head by a fragment.

The Chief Engineer had come on deck only a few minutes before all this happened. He had been in the engine room fifteen solid hours and was looking for a breath of fresh air. He had thought that things would be quiet for a while.

His first assistant was missing, it developed. So was an oiler. As far as anyone knew, everybody else had escaped. The *Jason's* light and telephone communications were wrecked.

Sewell appeared to get a report for the Old Man and he ordered Scotty and me to follow him below. At the bottom of the first flight of steps there was a wavering glow. Someone had lighted a lantern and lashed it to a pipe and there it swayed, shooting its rays across twisted, shattered machinery. We stood on an iron grating. When I turned my pocket flash on the ship's plates we saw that the *Jason* was still taking in some sea through the hole on her water-line as she rocked gently in a ground swell. It was impossible to see down to the next deck, which was flooded. The black, oily water must have been nearly neck high. We could hear the Chief and his

DYNAMITE CARGO

men talking somewhere aft and shuffled along a catwalk in their direction.

Their flashlights were hunting back and forth across the wreckage. The lights trailed across splintered pieces of wood, a brown cap fell on something bulky we thought was a body until it swished around in a swirl of water and turned out to be a pair of overalls.

Sewell and the Chief conferred. None of the thwartship bulkheads had been damaged, they decided, and there was no danger of the *Jason's* sinking. The water was confined to the one compartment, and she would float indefinitely. Float—but not go anywhere, except where wind and currents carried her. The Chief was going to hunt for the bodies of his assistant and the oiler. He sent one of his men to fetch rubber suits so that they could get down into the mess. Sewell took Scotty and me topsides. It was a job for the engine room men, who would know their way around.

Our prospects were not good. Sewell went back to the bridge. No word came down from the Old Man, and some of us drifted forward and hung over the rail, staring into the darkness. We were pretty certain that the convoy had left us cold. Straining your

DYNAMITE CARGO

eyes, you would imagine that you saw the shape of a British warship in the night, but actually there was nothing visible or audible on that dark ocean. Dark is an understatement. The stars were blanketed by the overcast which had hung over us ever since we left port. It was black.

This wouldn't last long, though. In an hour daylight would begin to streak the east and then we would be a helpless and very visible quarry for the first Nazi plane.

There was no panic. There hadn't been any before and there was none now, not even a whimper. We who had shipped to Russia because the wages were high simply waited to hear what the Old Man ordered. Bums that we were, we had given the Nazi snobs a fight. Now we were temporarily licked. We just waited with a kind of dumb resignation.

Sewell's twangy voice floated down from the bridge. "If we're not taken in tow at daylight by the British we'll abandon ship. We're some forty miles south of Spitsbergen and we can make it easily in the boats." This was the Old Man's decision then. He wasn't going to give up his ship until he had to. We didn't believe for a minute that the British

DYNAMITE CARGO

would take us in tow, even if one of the escort ships did find us. We figured that the best we could hope for was to be taken off, and that was unlikely. We had seen enough of the convoy business to know that the High Command had to figure in material percentages. The object was to get as many ships to Russia as possible. They must certainly have written us off.

Some of the men thought we ought to take to the boats now so that we could get well clear of the *Jason* before daylight. There was some argument among us but no real beefing.

The lad who had been hit on the head in the explosion was not seriously hurt. He reappeared wearing a big white bandage and an air of superiority, telling everybody all about it. The search in the engine room was still going on. I met one of the engine room crew, a fellow they called Mickey, as he was coming up the companionway, water and slime dripping from his rubber suit. He looked a little sick and he was shuddering with cold after wading shoulder deep in the bloody compartment. His own idea was that the two men had been blown to shreds. I began to feel a little sick myself. I remembered the assistant, a little wiry man with black

DYNAMITE CARGO

hair, who wore a pair of glasses in a broken metal frame which he had fixed with adhesive tape. I didn't remember the oiler at all. Mickey told me he was a Jewish boy and described him. He always wore a khaki sweater, Mickey said. But still I didn't remember him. Mickey had been sent to get warm again and drink some coffee. The Chief was about ready to give up the search.

Our orders were to collect the few personal belongings we would be able to take along, if we did abandon ship, and to overhaul the lifeboats and stock them with extra provisions. I was certain that the boat at my station was O.K., for I had looked it over that morning. I went down to the galley for the provisions which Black Tom was doling out to supplement the emergency rations already in the boats. Lafferty was in charge of our boat anyhow, and I expected he would check up. I found out later that he expected the same of the Salesman, who was also in our boat, and me. We were both experienced hands. Lafferty himself was busy figuring out our exact position and collecting what ship's records the Old Man thought he ought to take along. The Salesman was doing the same thing I was, making sure that we were going to keep our bellies filled. We

DYNAMITE CARGO

dumped the food into our boat, working in the darkness—our strict orders being not to show any lights. So neither of us discovered anything wrong until later.

I put on my rubber suit and stuffed into it a box of Muriel cigars, three cartons of Luckies and the manuscript of my life at sea. Most of my clothes and gear would have to be left. Scotty was still trying to figure out what he would take. The place looked as though it had been stirred with a spoon. Poor Scotty, out of habit, was hanging my junk on hooks as I slammed the door.

When I got on deck there was already a glimmer of dawn. When it started coming it came fast, spreading a pale yellow light across the sea and sky. And with it, unbelievably, we saw first the wisp of smoke of a ship hull down on the horizon, then saw it grow into the squat silhouette of one of the British mine sweepers. The white water peeled off from her bow.

Signal flags ran up our halliards. A couple of hundred yards away, she slowed, turned, and moved carefully past us under our lee. A man on the bridge, bundled up in a parka, hailed us cheerfully

DYNAMITE CARGO

through a megaphone. Through his megaphone the Old Man explained our situation.

"All right," came the answer. "Put your boats over."

"I can send my men down a ladder," the Old Man proposed.

"You can, old boy. But I don't care to come in any closer to a floating hulk full of high explosives."

The Old Man looked hurt. I guess he didn't like to have the *Jason* referred to as a hulk, even though that was all she was for all practical purposes. He gave the order, however, to put the boats over and abandon ship. I saw the Chief talking to the Old Man. They had given up the search for the assistant and the oiler.

Everything was under control. I remember one of the Navy kids coming up to Ensign Hawley, snapping a salute and inquiring very solemnly: "Have we your permission to leave the ship, sir?" It was funny. But at the same time it was kind of impressive.

There were about ten men in our No. 3 boat's crew, commanded by Lafferty and including the Salesman and Willy, who began to cast off the boat's bow and stern falls. Those are the lines which raise

DYNAMITE CARGO

and lower the lifeboats and hold them in the davits. I started to ask Willy if he had remembered to bring the portrait of Rosalind when Lafferty barked: "Lower away." The stern end which Willy held began to lower. But the other end did not move, though the Salesman had slackened off his line. The Salesman began to curse, took a turn with his line, and climbed on the rail to inspect the davit blocks.

"They're fouled up with oil." We all took a look. We decided that when the Heinkel had let go the bomb, cascading water over us, the sea must have been covered with oil from one of the torpedoed tankers. The Salesman took out his knife and began to dig out the ice and thick oil that had jammed the ropes.

The other boats had got away by now. Even the Old Man had gone, which was not strictly according to tradition, but he must have thought we were all clear. The Old Man had a good deal to worry about just to get himself over the side. He weighed over two hundred, and I think he was arthritic. His boat was on the leeward side and out of sight. The other boat on our side had already disappeared around our stern in the direction of the mine

DYNAMITE CARGO

sweeper, from which the man in the parka suddenly called through his trumpet, "Hurry it up, now."

We began to feel an unreasonable sense of panic. The Salesman dug away furiously and Lafferty stepped forward to give him some advice. So did Willy. As he did, his end of the boat dropped violently. Willy had neglected to take a turn with his line and when he moved towards the Salesman he must have tripped. The line ran out through his gloved hands. For a second the boat hung there straight up and down. Lafferty knocked Willy aside, grabbing for the end of the line. Then the weight of the boat broke the bowlines out of the blocks, and down she went, capsized.

"Haul away," Lafferty roared. "Get her up again."

We hauled away. Up she came, dumping out boxes, gear, oars. Lafferty's idea was to right her as fast as we could, lower her properly and salvage the stuff, particularly the oars, before it all floated away on the sea.

The Salesman, who had been cursing and growling under his breath, lost his head then. He was a good seaman in spite of his wrangling and his sour ideas. But the increasing panic which we all felt

DYNAMITE CARGO

put him off his base. "Where the hell's the Old Man?" he began to jeer. "What the hell's his idea leavin' the ship? He ain't in command no more. He can't shove me around no more." Still holding the bowline, he stumbled backwards over a suitcase. It was Lafferty's and it contained the *Jason*'s documents and money. "Ah-h-h, you dirty fink," he screeched at Lafferty. "Suckin' up to the company out in the middle of the Arctic."

Lafferty still had hold of the other line or he probably would have hit the Salesman. The muscles of his jaw tightened and he gave the Salesman a look of fury. "Haul away," he rasped. At the same moment we heard the man on the mine sweeper bellow: "Aboard the *Jason*—what the bloody hell's going on? We're being attacked!"

We heard the drone of a plane. Lafferty took a quick hitch, ran across the deck. We followed him, our eyes on the sky. The plane was not visible but the drone was getting louder, and across the expanse of gray water we saw the mine sweeper getting under way. The man in the parka was not even looking our way. He had his megaphone pointed at the mine sweeper's deck and was saying something, which we could not hear, to several of his sailors who were

DYNAMITE CARGO

just then hauling our Old Man aboard. Then the *Jason's* empty and abandoned lifeboats bobbed in the mine sweeper's wake as she made a wide turn and showed us her stern. I had the hysterical impulse to shout, "Hey, come back," but all any of us did was peer after her, then stare wildly at the clouds.

We saw the plane, phantomlike in the overcast, then sharp and clear, growing in size and coming right at us. The Salesman was the first to move. He ran for one of the 20-mm. guns. The rest of us scattered like chickens, awkward and ungainly in our life jackets and heavy rubber suits, stuffed full of our possessions.

It was a big Heinkel, heading so that it would sweep us from stem to stern. Machine-gun bullets pinged against the cargo of tanks on our foredeck and rattled along the *Jason's* house. Crouched against the house I ducked my head and like a damn fool closed my eyes. Just before I did I had a flash of Willy, standing exposed and with one arm up over his head. Then the Heinkel had passed, shooting out across our stern and making a sharp turn. The Nazis were going after the mine sweeper. They had

DYNAMITE CARGO

not bothered to drop an egg on us. They were just playing around. Willy lay sprawled on the deck.

No one stopped to take a look at him then. Instead we dashed for the *Jason's* guns. The Salesman by now was at one of the starboard 20 mms. I took the gun next to him, with an ordinary named Robinson standing by to load. As I remember it, Lafferty and an oiler and a couple of wipers manned two other guns on the port side. The Heinkel was coming back, having thought twice about getting mixed up with the mine sweeper. We saw now what the Britisher was up to. She had not run out on us, she was merely standing off so that she could get a better angle on the plane as it swooped down to attack the *Jason*. A stream of tracers from her ack-acks cut across the Heinkel's tail just as it banked. I wheeled my gun to get a bead on him, tried to hold him as he came on. We all had sense enough to hold our fire until the Heinkel was almost on top of us. His machine guns began to splatter our decks. Then all four of our guns cut loose almost at the same time. The mine sweeper probably caught the Nazi in her line of fire too. I don't know who or how many of us hit him, but he went to pieces like a paper box. One of his wings broke

DYNAMITE CARGO

off and hurtled into the sea, the hot engine hissing when it hit the water and carrying the wing under with its weight. What was left of the plane rocked crazily, then it, too, hit the sea some fifty feet astern of us, sending up a terrific splash. The fuselage must have flooded immediately because the Nazi sank like a stone.

I remember getting a laugh out of the Salesman then. He raised his arms and waved his fists in the air. I walked over to Willy. His mouth was open and a rivulet of blood had run from it and frozen on his cheek. Willy was dead. There was nothing in the world I could do about it. Lafferty came over and we pulled Willy's rubber suit up around his face as a kind of shroud. While I was fumbling around him I felt something hard and square inside the suit. He hadn't forgotten Rosalind's picture. She would hear about it in time, when the main office notified her and returned her letters. We lashed some cases of 20-mm. shells to the kid's feet and put him overboard, Lafferty mumbling something that sounded religious.

Chapter Eight

THE MINE SWEEPER took us off in one of her own boats.

A businesslike crew of British sailors came alongside with a young officer in charge who asked for a rope ladder which we put over. He climbed aboard, followed by two sailors lugging demolition bombs. He told Lafferty very courteously to get us all into the boat. There was a chance of another Nazi plane spotting us any time. We swarmed down into the boat. The Britishers presently returned from planting the charges in the *Jason's* hold and we pulled away.

DYNAMITE CARGO

I felt queerly reluctant to leave her. She had turned out to be no haven but she was familiar, and as long as we were aboard her we had a certain amount of self-determination. Now everything was out of our control. We were survivors—in somebody else's hands.

"We're in a bit of a hurry, you know," the British officer said sharply. Sailors on the mine sweeper's low deck reached out and hauled us aboard. Almost immediately we got under way. A series of dull blasts rolled across the water and the *Jason* rocked. As we watched she began to settle. It did not take her long. Scotty and a number of others who had gotten off in the first boats came and stood with us at the rail, watching her in silence as she went. I didn't see the Old Man around. The Salesman's face was sullen. I think he was trying to cover up the vague feeling of tragedy which the sight gave us. I thought also of the terrible waste—all our gear, thousands of tons of steel and machinery, thousands of tons of supplies, God knows how many man-hours of labor. The water was over the *Jason's* bridge. She was going down on an even keel, very dignifiedly. Her stack vanished and only her masts showed, but not for long. Pretty soon there was

DYNAMITE CARGO

nothing but the flat, leaden sea. We had been lucky, considering what had happened to Willy, the assistant engineer and the oiler.

The crew gave us some tea. The fellow who poured me a cup told me that they had almost three hundred survivors aboard now, including the crowd from the *Jason*. The Britishers were very solicitous and tried to cheer us up. The rest of the convoy was some miles to the east but they expected to overtake it that night. I wasn't sure that this was so cheering.

We were a mixed and weird-looking cargo of passengers. We were all over the little ship, crowded into alleyways, the mess room, sprawled on deck in the lee of the house. Among those in the jammed mess room was a big, handsome Russian girl whose blonde hair was close-cropped like a man's, and whose bare white arms were like marble. She looked as if she might have been a jolly, lusty woman. Now she sat on the deck beside two other Russian women, older and plainer, occasionally murmuring something to one of them but for the most part keeping silent. I found out that her husband, with whom she had gone to sea, had been killed in the explosion which had destroyed their ship. The

DYNAMITE CARGO

three women had been picked up the night before from an open boat just after the blonde girl had been delivered of a stillborn child.

Some of the survivors had been burned. Some of them lay huddled in blankets, faces drained and vacant, lips blue, breathing in short, rapid gasps. They were shock victims. Some suffered from exposure, shivering convulsively in their blankets. Some were simply exhausted, like a pair of British merchant marine officers in filthy gold-braided uniforms lying sound asleep near a doorway where everyone who came in had to step over them.

A few of the survivors were completely unnerved by what they had been through, and the idea of being safe for a while produced some curious reactions. A redhead kid with an Indiana accent stood up in the middle of the room suddenly and yelled: "I say, goddam these limeys." He shook his fist, addressing everyone around him. "I say their goddam navy didn't give us proper protection." And he went on in that vein until I thought there would be a fight. But none of the British paid any attention to him and just as abruptly he quit yelling and sat down.

Scotty told me about the redhead. One day when

DYNAMITE CARGO

his ship was being attacked by planes he ran up on the fly bridge where there was a little .30 caliber. He had had experience with a gun like it on another ship. He had nothing to protect him but some canvas dodgers. His gun had neither the fire power nor the range to do any damage but he stayed there peppering away until the gun got so hot that it fouled. When his ship was torpedoed, he and another man were blown overboard and he held his shipmate up until they were fished out. Red's shipmate had been dead before he hit the water, as it turned out. Red himself was half dead by the time they rescued him. There was nothing wrong with his courage then. The only thing wrong with him now was that he was going through a nervous reaction.

Besides Americans there were Englishmen, Scots, Norwegians, Belgians and several Frenchmen. The last were Bretons who had escaped from their occupied country in a fishing boat. They had spent a few days in England in a sailors' home, recovering, then had shipped aboard an English freighter. Most of the Norwegians had had the same kind of experience. There were twelve of them, all that were left of the crew of their torpedoed merchantman.

DYNAMITE CARGO

I got most of this from a Belgian officer who had shipped for years on the old Red Star passenger ships out of Antwerp. He spoke pretty good English. He was a big, muscular man about forty-five. He had been in the middle of the Atlantic, he told me, when the Germans had invaded Belgium. His ship had put into Liverpool. He had a wife and three kids in Antwerp but he had heard nothing from them until months later when he got word that they had been slain in the Nazi bombing.

He was still on a Belgian ship when the British retreated to the beach at Dunkirk and he had helped in the evacuation. One of his ship's launches was pressed into service and he was put in command of it, ferrying wounded British across the Channel. Then his ship was put under English registry and she had carried munitions around the Cape of Good Hope and up to Suez. This was her first, and last, trip in the Arctic. All but a handful of her crew had gone down with her. A big consignment of cordite had been part of her cargo, he told me, and she had literally blown in half.

He broke off his jerky conversation every once in a while to laugh, not at anything in particular

DYNAMITE CARGO

but as if he had to laugh now and then or he would forget how to do it.

The crew of the mine sweeper took it all in their stride. They had been in this business for a long time and they knew how to handle everything, from taking insults and grumblings to burying those who died. They passed out tea and cocoa and broth. They dressed wounds. They cleaned up vomit. They did what they could to keep up our spirits.

One of the ratings told me that they had been on this job for two years without a let-up, working back and forth on the fringes of convoys from the United Kingdom to northern Russia. During the Arctic winter night they laid over in Iceland. They wouldn't see home until summer. They had made more rescues than they could remember. It was all down in the log. That log would make a story. Once they had rescued the same crew of an American freighter from three separate ships. They took the Yankees off their own ship first, the rating explained, and landed them in Murmansk. Then a British destroyer that was taking the Yankees home was torpedoed off Bear Island in the middle of the Arctic, and the mine sweeper picked them up, later

DYNAMITE CARGO

transferred them to a British cruiser. The cruiser sank with three torpedoes in her and the mine sweeper rescued the Yankees again. "We had to donate more clothes to them after every catastrophe until they didn't have a stitch on their backs except what was ours. Decent chaps. We grew quite fond of them."

We labored, dangerously overloaded, through increasingly heavy seas. One of the ship's crew, trying to be reassuring, made light of torpedoes. "Our gunner popped one of them the other day, he did. Exploded it with a shell. We got a bit wet."

Part of the time I slept. I remember flopping down on the afterdeck between Scotty and Pete, one of the Cape Verde Negroes. We had just had short rations of tea, biscuits and some kind of thin soup. I was still feeling hungry and staring out over the stern at the ship's white wake, thinking I enjoyed the relief from being under constant attack, but I would have liked being back on the *Jason* with enough grub to eat and room to turn around —when I went out like a light. It was late in the afternoon when I woke up.

The ship had hove to—that was what woke me. By the time the three of us had pulled ourselves to-

DYNAMITE CARGO

gether and climbed over legs and arms and reached the rail, we were getting under way again. But off our port beam we saw what must have been the reason for our stopping. It was a lifeboat floating bottom up with three men clinging to it. Apparently we weren't going to pick them up. "What the hell?" I asked a British sailor. "They're all dead," he answered. They were frozen to the boat's bottom. By the markings on the boat, he said, it was from an American tanker.

We were in the path of the convoy now all right. We could tell that by the debris. Three half-submerged lifeboats floated by, boxes, rafts, a kapok mattress. A body supported by a lifebelt bobbed past, the arms extended in rigor mortis and the gray, wet face thrust up and staring fixedly at us.

Aboard our ship a gun suddenly barked, and some two hundred yards off our starboard beam the water shot up and the sound of an explosion came to us. One of the gunners had picked off a floating mine. The gunner, a New Zealander, was the pride of the ship. He was a dead shot, they all boasted—had absolute and instantaneous coordination. He never missed. Next to their ship they loved this young gunner. I got a look at him. He was a

DYNAMITE CARGO

freckle-faced lad of about twenty with narrow shoulders that slanted like a gable roof and certainly no physical model for a hero. I was a little skeptical of him until I got another sample of his gunnery later on.

Clearly we were getting back into the thick of things, though there was no sign yet of enemy planes, nor had anyone sighted the convoy's parade of ships. We were wondering what they were going to do with us. They couldn't keep us aboard the mine sweeper all the way through to Archangel. Scotty and I decided we would probably be transferred to one of the warships. Said the Salesman: "They better feed us better than the stinkin' rations we been gettin' aboard this ship."

Ever since we had come aboard, the Salesman had been growling and grumbling. He was laying for the Old Man to tell him to his face that he couldn't push him around any more. He hadn't had the chance yet because the Old Man hadn't given it to him. The Old Man surrendered all his authority when he got aboard the British ship. He said very little to anyone, even to Sewell and Laferty. He declined the British skipper's invitation to share a room with another shipwrecked mer-

DYNAMITE CARGO

chant captain and sat patiently in the crowded mess room. There was nothing aloof in the Old Man's attitude. He nodded politely to everyone. For the most part he simply sat there with a melancholy expression on his heavy, unshaven face.

But now the Salesman got his opportunity. The shrill whistle of a bosun's pipe was sounding, and a sailor came along our deck announcing that the ship's captain wanted a word with us all in the crew's mess. The Salesman spat. "To hell with him! I got a bellyful of captains already."

The Old Man overheard him. He was shuffling along, his distracted blue eyes on the gray sea. He stopped short and barked: "Do as they tell you."

It was the Salesman's cue. "You ain't pushin' me around," he said belligerently. "You go to hell. You ain't runnin' this ship. You ain't captain of any ship any more." He went along like this, throwing in some remarks about the rights of the common man and so on, his chin thrust out. Scotty's and my eyes met. I think we felt shocked.

The Old Man stood there with his mouth open and his watery old eyes on the Salesman's red face. With all the contempt he could muster, he finally croaked: "You common riffraff," and stumped off.

DYNAMITE CARGO

The Salesman gave a jeer but it didn't sound like much. He was so mad he could hardly talk. Well, he had shot his mouth finally and the Old Man had given him his answer in three short words. Scotty and I went down to the mess room.

We all had to stand up in order to get everyone in the place. I got another look at the Russian girl. She was standing, smoking a cigarette. The skipper, a lieutenant commander, mounted a chair. The word he wanted to have with us was this:

We were coming up on the convoy. They had been getting it rather hot. We would all have to stay on his ship that night. We were to make the best of it. He was beastly sorry. Tomorrow some of us would be transferred to another ship to make more room all around. Meanwhile we were not to worry. We might, of course, be attacked quite heavily. The Nazi planes concentrated on the warships, though we chaps who had been knocked out, he admitted, had good reason to believe that the Nazis had concentrated on us. "As a matter of fact, the Jerries do go for us with special venom," he said. "They are rather jealous of His Majesty's ships, having no respectable navy of their own." His men would assign us battle stations and if we

DYNAMITE CARGO

were attacked we were to go to them, keeping the best possible order. "Thank you very much."

Out on deck again, we saw that fog banks were rolling in from the south. This was probably a good break, we thought. There would be less chance of an attack, though more chance of a collision when we overtook the other ships. In the fog, as we watched it, suddenly appeared the shadowy, distant shape of a plane. I don't think the Nazi was looking for us. I think he was figuring on making an evening swoop over the tail end of the convoy. But he must have spotted us and decided to come over for a closer look. He crossed over far ahead, then banked and started back towards us. We plowed steadily on. He was a Junkers 88. He kept up above our anti-aircraft, banked again and began to dive. There was nothing tentative about him now. He was hammering after us, close to the water so that he would be too low for the anti-aircraft, and in position to launch his torpedo.

The Oerlikon in the hands of the New Zealand gunner began to explode. Cerise tracer tracks streaked into the waves under the Junkers. I wondered frantically why the gunner didn't raise his sights, and watched, expecting every instant to see

DYNAMITE CARGO

the Junkers drop its tin fish. But instead a great gush of flame suddenly swept over the big bomber. She went over nose first and collapsed in a mass of wreckage, fire and smoke.

"'E 'ops 'em," a sailor told me gleefully. "'E skips 'em off the water up under their bellies."

I have heard that the British gunners have used the method with a good deal of success. The underside of the plane presents a bigger target than its silhouette. But a man has to be good to skip the shells up just so, I should think. I was satisfied after the exhibition that the New Zealander rated all the admiration that he got.

We steamed on slowly through the thickening fog.

Chapter Nine

THE LIEUTENANT COMMANDER's worst fears were not realized. We weren't attacked that night, though there must have been U-boats in the neighborhood because we heard depth charges thudding throughout the brief hours of darkness. There was not much sleeping. With all of us jammed below there was no room to lie down. Two dim bulbs shone in the mess room—the portholes were blacked out—and they threw shadows against the bulkheads with a macabre effect. The room was heavy with smells, restless with the stirring and shifting around, groans and grunts, and mumbled profanity.

DYNAMITE CARGO

None of us claimed to be heroic, though we had a certain amount of recklessness or we wouldn't have been in this business. But there was not even any bravado in us now. We were just a wretched mob, waiting dumbly for whatever might happen to us next.

The mess boys came at dawn, bringing us cocoa and biscuits. They told us that we had been in contact with the rest of the convoy since midnight. It had been a little sticky because of fog, but there had been no casualties. The fog had probably saved us from a U-boat attack. The sound detectors had picked up U-boats all around. They were going to make the transfer immediately because the fog was beginning to blow away and we could expect an attack any time. The mine sweeper, low in the water, slow to answer her helm, was in serious danger every minute that she carried this overload. A petty officer appeared in the mess room. He announced sharply: "Survivors from the *Jason*, the X—, and Y— and the Z— (he named three sunken merchant ships), up on deck please, and make it as lively as you can."

As lively as we could, we went up on deck. There in the cold Arctic dawn was the parade of merchant-

DYNAMITE CARGO

men and warships still plodding east. Some of them were obscured by the low, scudding mist, but we could tell that we were in the midst of the formation, heading obliquely across it and holding a course to converge with the flagship *Scylla*. It was the *Scylla* that was going to take us aboard, they said. We wondered how they would manage it. I had an idea that we would make the transfer in small boats. That was not their idea. They were in too much of a hurry.

We came up with the *Scylla* making around sixteen knots, and with only about one hundred yards of water between us. The great steel mass of the cruiser *Scylla* could split us open like a crate. Our courses were still converging. The space of water between us now was not more than one hundred feet. I realized what they were up to. I saw Ensign Hawley watching the maneuver with fascination and disbelief.

They didn't give us time to decide whether we approved or not. Very businesslike, the sailors on the mine sweeper lined us up, counted us off in groups of ten. We were going to jump.

From our bow shot a light heaving line, which the boys on the *Scylla* caught and hauled in, taking

DYNAMITE CARGO

aboard our four-inch manilla bowline which they carried forward and made fast around a bitt. There was a heavy ground swell, and the wind which was blowing away the fog was raising an ugly chop. Although protected somewhat by the *Scylla*'s lee, we rolled in the swell and pitched prettily in the chop. The motion of the *Scylla* was more deliberate but very perceptible nevertheless. One moment her rail was lifted above us, the next moment she leaned our way, showing us her great cluttered deck. Hard, cold spray swept across both our bows. But there was no reducing of speeds. Abreast of each other we hurtled on through the sea.

Because of the action of the water between, the tendency of two ships so close and under way is to draw still closer together. If the tendency is allowed to continue and one of the ships gets out of control, they will probably smash each other's sides. In this case the big *Scylla* would do all the smashing. It was an extremely ticklish and hazardous undertaking. We could touch the *Scylla* only for an instant, then would have to sheer away. Each time we touched ten men would jump.

The hazards that awaited any of us who missed were apparent to the naked eye. We might be

DYNAMITE CARGO

squashed to death or, plunging between, get swept astern and sucked into the propellers. If we escaped the propellers there was little possibility of our being rescued from the sea. The British were dealing in percentage again. It would be one life against the safety of hundreds of others. Homer or somebody wrote about a Scylla and Charybdis who were hell to get between. Charybdis was not the mine sweeper's name. But everything else looked pretty classically correct to me.

A whistle sounded sharply from the cruiser. Lunging and rolling, we closed in. A wave broke across our bow and swirled around our feet. The first ten men were poised like monkeys along our rail. Over they went and we sheered off. The first ten made it O.K.

The manilla line between us came up dripping out of the sea, straightening and tautening as the mine sweeper romped along now like a dog on a short leash. Once more she closed and over went the second group.

I was in the third. I had a moment to realize that they had probably picked the most agile looking men to go in the first more or less experimental stages. I stood at the rail feeling anything but agile

DYNAMITE CARGO

in my rubber suit stuffed with a box of cigars, three cartons of cigarettes and the manuscript of my life at sea.

Bluejackets lined the *Scylla*'s sides, watching us, braced and ready to grab. We swung in. There was a creaking and grinding as we leaped. I landed convulsively clutching a sailor's sleeve.

The whole two hundred of us made it without any accident and as far as I know without any damage to the two ships. They were brought into contact at least twenty times in that heaving sea, bowling along at sixteen knots an hour. I have to hand it to the British Navy.

I never got to see any of the rest make the jump. The minute we landed on the *Scylla*, almost before we could take a breath of relief, they hustled us right on in order to keep the area clear. There was a double line of bluejackets who passed us along like buckets in a fire brigade. We were passed down a companionway, along a passageway and into the crew's mess.

Black Tom, our cook, told me that they kept the Russian women until along towards the end. They tied a heaving line around the Old Man—who must have felt pretty uneasy at his age and with arthritis

DYNAMITE CARGO

and more than two hundred pounds of weight—and saved him until the very last. Black Tom made the jump beside him. Then the mine sweeper hauled her bowline in, he said, and streaked off like a hog with a tail full of buckshot.

The crew of the *Scylla* wasted no time either. Several petty officers appeared immediately and began writing our names in memorandum books. The crew's mess was about four times the size of the mine sweeper's, with long tables and leather-covered benches. Besides our crowd there were thirty or forty other survivors, some of them stretched flat on the deck, asleep. They were Britishers off a merchantman. About a dozen other, surly-looking guys, who sat apart, turned out to be Nazi prisoners, bomber crews who had been shot down and picked up by the ships they were trying to sink. I looked them over with interest. The petty officers assigned us seats at the tables and said those would be our places as long as we were aboard. We were to sleep here too. A senior P.O. announced: "Our A and B guns are directly overhead. You'll soon get used to their noise. Please do not go on deck during the action, or any action. And do not explore the compartment immediately forward of you. It's empty,

DYNAMITE CARGO

but if we are hit we want to have the watertight door shut just as it is. If the lights should happen to go out, don't be alarmed. The electricians will manage something. We expect a show of some kind in a very few minutes. The ship has a loudspeaker system," he added. "An officer on the bridge will keep you informed of what's going on. Much better to know than to be kept speculating here below."

As he spoke, a jumble of blurred noises came out of an amplifier over our heads. Then a voice said calmly: "You men below there. We are now in the first degree of readiness. We anticipate a U-boat attack. We may also be attacked from the air. In any event, may I suggest that if the action becomes serious you lie prone, the better to avoid danger from splintering plates." There was silence, another jumble of sound, and then the clipped British voice again:

"And now, gunners—attention, please. It is suggested that if the action is prolonged you watch your fire towards the close. In any prolonged action of this kind the fire naturally gets a little loose and wild towards the end. So watch your fire, please. Endeavor to keep it as concentrated as you can."

We had been staring at the amplifier as if we ex-

DYNAMITE CARGO

pected any instant to see the man come out of it with his voice. Now a lot of eyes, including my own, began to drift around. If a hit should cut us off from any of the passageways there was only one way of escape—a manhole about three feet across in the deck above. A narrow, fixed ladder ran up to it. There were close to three hundred of us in the room.

As it developed, we were just getting a build-up during those first hours. The U-boat attack never materialized, although the British gave the roving Germans a hot time. Said the cheerful voice in the amplifier: "They haven't done us any damage yet, have they? Persistent beggars, though—ah, there's a bit of mud in their eye. One of the U-boats has surfaced and is unable to submerge again. Listen now. . . . Hear it? Perhaps you can't down there. One of our destroyer leaders is knocking the Nazi to bits with five-inch fire. Right-o. Nice clean hit. . . . Hit again. And now she's going. . . . Gone under for good and all."

We had heard the distant booming of the five-inch gun.

Now three other destroyers were lined up some-

DYNAMITE CARGO

where to starboard of the *Scylla*, the voice said, making a concentrated examination of the ocean floor. "If you hear a commotion it will just be their depth charges. Churns the water up some. Don't let it alarm you—" A concussion shook the ship with such violence that I was thrown against Scotty and the mess room was filled with deafening, echoing sound. "Don't let it alarm you," the voice repeated, and in a moment added, "Rather a substantial charge." The voice's explanation was that all three destroyers had made contact at the same moment and had let their depth bombs go simultaneously. "Water tumbled all over us up here. I, for one, am drenched."

Apparently the U-boats dispersed and fled then, though we were warned not to feel too hopeful. The voice announced that a bit of lunch was on its way below. Stewards arrived presently with sandwiches and coffee, which we wolfed. We'd have the mess pretty much to ourselves, the stewards said, since the *Scylla*'s crew would remain at battle stations, where they would be fed. In fact, the stewards told us, they had hardly left their stations for days, even to sleep.

I noticed that the prisoners got the same food and

DYNAMITE CARGO

the same courteous treatment we got. "We treat 'em decently," a solemn-faced, wall-eyed British merchant seaman told me. "They're prisoners of war in uniform and entitled to the conventions."

The fact that they were under no particular surveillance, except for a young bluejacket who sat to one side rubbing the back of his neck in a bored way, surprised me some.

My wall-eyed friend explained, "They're mostly Finns and Norwegians. Our lads will keep the Germans somewhere else. They don't exactly trust them. These lads don't 'ave much 'eart by the time our chaps pick them up—after floatin' in the sea on a bit of sinkin' wreckage. They're welcome to try to escape if they want to—step right overboard, they can."

I sauntered over to them under the bluejacket's watchful gaze. The British were careful about who mixed with these boys. There could be some of us with a very special grudge who might not know about the conventions. I asked the sailor if I could talk to them. "Go ahead," he said. "If you know their language."

I didn't, but one of them, who turned out to be a Norwegian, knew English. He said he had once

DYNAMITE CARGO

worked in New York as a sandhog. He was a big, raw-boned man. His *Luftwaffe* uniform was streaked with grease and blood, and he carried a bandaged hand in a sling. He was willing enough to talk. He told me without emotion that the bomber he was piloting had been shot down by a destroyer. The rest of his crew had been killed by an ack-ack shell that had exploded inside the cabin. He had made a crash landing in the sea, and the destroyer had picked him up as his plane was sinking under him.

"Why do you want to fight for Germany?" I asked him. "Germany invaded and seized your country."

"I fight for the Fuehrer. My country is better off under the Fuehrer."

I asked him how he justified strafing helpless seamen who were abandoning sinking ships.

He shrugged. "You go back and bring more ships. If we kill you there won't be so many to man more ships. And others will hear about it and they will be afraid to come."

I wanted to tell him that he was a cold-blooded rat and that he underrated us. These fellows were plainly a little punch-drunk after what they had

DYNAMITE CARGO

been through, but there was still enough Nazi arrogance left in them to bring me up to a slow boil.

I nodded at a skinny lad with a white scar along his jaw who was watching us. "What's his nationality?"

"Finn."

"Why does he want to bomb American ships? Finland isn't at war with America."

The Norwegian flung some guttural at his skinny friend who stared sullenly at me as he spoke.

"He says," the Norwegian interpreted, "the material is going to Russia to be used against Finland. He wants to know why your country sends supplies to Finland's enemy?"

I said: "Tell him America sends it to Russia to fight Germany. All Finland has to do is quit fighting Russia."

The Finn spoke a few words and shifted his stare to another part of the room. Apparently he was through talking.

"But Finland hates Russia, he says."

"Do you actually think you can win now with America in the war?" I asked the Norwegian.

"America is rotten. America is like France."

DYNAMITE CARGO

"What about the supplies America can produce?"

"American production is no good to anybody when it's sunk in the ocean. That is why Britain and Russia won't win, even with America. If America had any sense she would save her production to help the Fuehrer rebuild Europe after the war—instead of wasting it now on munitions which are sunk. The Fuehrer had no quarrel with you to begin with. Many Americans themselves have said so."

The voice in the amplifier interrupted us. Things were pretty quiet, he said, so he and another officer were going to play a game of draughts. I didn't even know what draughts was. It turned out to be checkers. "It's rather important," he barked. "It's the rubber game in a set of three, and we've a bit of money up. I thought you might like to follow the moves and see who wins. I'm rather a duffer at it myself, but he's as keen as frost."

I was beginning to get used to British nonchalance, but it struck me that this was the limit. A steward popped into the mess room with a big checkerboard which he hung up. It had holes in the squares and peg pieces which he began moving

DYNAMITE CARGO

around as the broadcaster called the plays. We watched with mild curiosity. The broadcaster won the rubber but his friend demanded revenge, he said, so they played another. We began to lay a few bets ourselves. They played another, and another.

I found out later that it was a gag. The British seaman confided that the whole thing was planted just to keep us relaxed. "Nothing like a gyme, you know, to keep chaps bucked up. They say Winnie invented the system himself." A man he knew had been on deck duty on a British warship once and had seen two junior officers on the bridge reading off the moves of a game from a set of printed forms and with no checkerboard in sight.

It worked. Before long we were crowding around trying to figure out their moves, groaning when we thought our man pulled a boner and cheering when he pulled a fast one, noisily making and collecting bets. Even the silent Russian women got interested. I kept betting on the announcer and won six bucks. They played for two and a half hours—until the Nazis broke it up.

The voice said suddenly: "I think we're in for it. Gunners, remember please what I said about watching your fire towards the close if the action becomes

DYNAMITE CARGO

prolonged. Here they come. Five—seven twenty-two—thirty—forty-four torpedo bombers coming in. You chaps below, lie prone for a bit."

Scotty, crouching down beside me on the cold deck, mumbled, "Jesus Christ."

Chapter Ten

I FOUND OUT SUBSEQUENTLY that the voice was that of a junior lieutenant. I had a glimpse of him coming down from the bridge. He looked about twenty—a blond kid with a face like a choirboy's. They told me that he was the son of a duke. Bill Stern never put on a show like the cool show that lad put on. I think he saved us all from going completely haywire.

Hour after hour throughout the onslaught he stood on the bridge rattling away. I remember him in one period of comparative calm telling us cheerfully, "It's frightfully difficult for them to score a

DYNAMITE CARGO

hit with our fire constantly harassing them. I'm not a betting man," he said, "but I'm willing to lay a pound or two that we'll come through the day unscathed. Any takers? You can send me a memo if you like by one of the stewards. Draft on your paymaster if you like, in case the Arctic already has your money. If I win you'll not mind paying up, will you? And if I lose—well, we all lose then, don't we?" He gave us a few minutes to figure it out and then admitted that he hadn't been serious. Of course, he couldn't take a bet unless both sides were equally sure to collect, he said. "Just a sort of rag, you know. What I'm trying to make clear—there isn't half the danger to all this that you must think there below."

We flopped down on the deck as he ordered. I suppose the idea was that we wouldn't get hurt by being knocked over and that we would be safer, perhaps, from flying fragments. The young Russian girl lay beside me, her close-shorn blonde head resting on one hand. She was dressed in a man's mackinaw and pants and her hands were red and chapped but her cheeks were as smooth as a pink china cup. I wished I knew some Russian. Her eyes were half closed. I don't think that she was looking at any-

DYNAMITE CARGO

thing. She had a perfectly blank expression on her broad, pretty face.

We must have been heading for the White Sea when the attack came. I remember wondering how long the Nazis would keep it up and at what point at last we would reach some kind of peace. This was the fourth day of almost ceaseless fighting.

The kid on the bridge was saying matter-of-factly: "This is the biggest convoy in England's naval history. They are rather anxious not to have it get through." There was a pause, then: "The torpedo bombers are working along the screen of destroyers and corvettes, but we expect them to come in closer for a try at the *Scylla*. The whole area is streaked with torpedo tracks. They seem to be trying something new—torpedoes on parachutes, which high-level bombers are dropping in this well-coordinated operation. The torpedoes move in a circular track which gets smaller and smaller until their motive power gives out. Very ingenious but none has done any damage yet. No; they are not having much luck with that. A number of parachutes are drifting through the sky away to the south of the fleet. Those that land among us are rather easy to dodge. . . .

DYNAMITE CARGO

"The high-level chaps are operating westward over the tail end of our fleet, though we cannot exactly make them out because they are up above the overcast. The chaps from the carrier are up having a look. We are proceeding ahead as is customary in this kind of warfare. Oh, ho—hold hard—"

I thought surely we had been hit. Sound seemed to belch at us. The *Scylla* shuddered as though she would shake the steel plates off her frame. The walls around us swayed and the deck lifted under us, then sickeningly dropped. We could feel it in our stomachs. I happened to have my eyes on the checkerboard, which had been left hanging on the bulkhead. It flew off the hook and sailed across the mess room. Then the lights went out and we were in darkness except for a shaft of light through the open manhole. The concussion echoed and echoed until my head felt like an iron bell that someone was beating with a hammer.

The *Scylla's* ack-ack guns were thundering. She had recovered and was on more or less of an even keel again and shaking now with the steady recoil of her own armament.

I could hear Black Tom trumpeting a profane litany of oaths.

DYNAMITE CARGO

"It's quite all right," the voice on the loud-speaker crackled above the uproar. "A little close for comfort that, but a miss is as good as a mile. That was a bolt from the blue, as it were. A bomb dropped from on high. The high-level bombers are over us now. We had to put the helm over very hard on an instant's notice. It exploded just off our port bow. It may have sounded quite noisy to you chaps below but it was really not bad. We're giving them a bit of something now. . . .

"You chaps all right? Don't pay any special attention if your lights go out. The electricians will rig up something. Now steady once again because here comes another fellow . . . But no—never. Our A.A. got that one. I wish you could see it. A Heinkel. It came out of the clouds and into a regular holocaust of our flak. Knocked him all over the place. That one will never bother anybody.

"We have everything but U-boats now. A number of Heinkel 111's carrying torpedoes have broken through the screen in the east and are heading for us—"

At that instant the *Scylla*'s Oerlikons and pom-poms cut loose: CRUMP, hack, hack, hack, CRUMP. Then the A and B guns directly over our

DYNAMITE CARGO

heads exploded with a thunder that swallowed everything else. The *Scylla* lurched and through the manhole we could feel the hot draft of their recoil. The air grew thick to breathe and we began to cough, and when the lights abruptly flashed on again we saw that the mess room was filled with dust. Paint was stripping from the bulkheads, shaken loose by the *Scylla's* terrible shivering.

I sat up. I was damned if I was going to get killed lying down. I preferred to get it sitting up. Some of the others had the same thought. My hands were clammy. I was frightened and awed as I have never been before in my life. I sat staring at the manhole opening. It is one thing to be on deck, know what is going on and take part in it, and another thing to be stuck below like rats in a trap. I wondered why I had ever shipped on this run. I had asked myself the question before but never as wonderingly as I asked it now.

Scotty had advanced the confident opinion, earlier in the day, that the *Scylla* would be as safe as a Staten Island ferryboat. Her speed and armor plate and fire power made her practically impregnable, Scotty said. One trouble with his theory was that her speed was governed by the convoy's. She

DYNAMITE CARGO

had to play a defensive role whether she liked it or not, crawling along and taking whatever the Nazis handed out in order to screen the cargo ships. As for her armor plate, I reminded Scotty of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. Jap torpedo bombers got them, and the Japs were amateurs compared to these Nazis. The *Scylla* was putting up plenty of fire power. She was hurling tons and tons of steel into the air. We could hear empty shells clattering like pins in a bowling alley across her deck. But I wasn't too reassured by this either. I could imagine not two or three but dozens of Heinkels and Junkers roaring in all at once, trying to penetrate our barrage and lay their tin fish into us.

The British seaman and two of his friends had pulled themselves up on a leather-covered bench. One of them was making a great pretense of reading a book. The other two had their red faces lifted towards the manhole and its warm breath.

"The beggars must be in close now," one of them shouted.

"Jerry means business today and no mistake."

"They want the plane carrier."

"They want the bloody ships that carry the munitions."

DYNAMITE CARGO

The fellow who was pretending to read looked up. "It's the bloody *Scylla* herself they're after."

The attack was spread across the whole convoy. Once the kid on the bridge announced: "I'm afraid it's another stout ship done for. We'll get her people off, never fear. One of the corvettes is making for her. There she goes—rotten sight. We're doing the best we can, you know." It was the only sinking he reported that day. I was sure that the main attack was concentrated on us. For one thing we had two admirals aboard—the commander of the naval escort, Rear Admiral R. L. Burnett, and the commodore of the convoy, Rear Admiral E. K. Bod-dam-Whetham. The Nazis may or may not have known that, but they would know that the *Scylla* was the core of the convoy's defense.

The infernal cacophony went on. Hack, hack, hack, CRUMP, hack, hack—then the massive thunder of the A and B guns—and the pom-poms beating through the waves of sound again—hack, hack, hack.

My wall-eyed friend began to pound out the rhythm on the table with his fist. One of the big barrel-chested Cape Verde Negroes sat cross-legged, swaying back and forth, holding his ears and roll-

DYNAMITE CARGO

ing his eyes at the deck above. Under the impact of sound alone men seemed to go to pieces. I remember one little guy in a ragged, knitted cap who crawled under a table, curled up there and stared out with the eyes of a whipped pup. Some men tried to talk and could only stammer. Even among the quiet, self-controlled ones like the Old Man and the preacher-ensign, Hawley, you could see the tension increasing like a coiled spring. It came into their eyes. It showed in the nervous way they drew back their lips. I caught a glimpse of the drained, white face of the Norwegian Nazi I had talked to. The expression he was wearing gave me some grim satisfaction.

Black Tom's performance was the strangest. With his long arms flopping loosely at his sides he stood up and began to shuffle. He made his own rhythm. As he shuffled he yelled: "Dat Hitler is a mother-raper but dis yeah ship is worse."

A couple of the *Scylla*'s bluejackets trotted through the mess room, faces smeared with grime and grease. Apparently they had been sent below for something and were on their way back to their battle stations. Black Tom clutched one of them—a sawed-off runt with a shock of sandy hair—and bel-

DYNAMITE CARGO

lowed in his ear: "You give them Nazi bastards hell, you heah? Don't you-all let them Nazi bastards git away wit' nothin'."

The sailor jerked himself free and skinned up the ladder through the open manhole, with Black Tom standing underneath, shaking his finger and hollering after him long after he had disappeared: "Mind what I tell you, mister. You give them bastards hell, you heah!"

Hour after hour it continued—the beat and roar and thunder of the *Scylla's* guns, the warm breathing of the manhole, the shuddering and swaying of the deck and bulkheads and the shouting and yelling in the mess room, while the *Jason's* wild-eyed cook pranced and the British seaman pounded with his fist and Ensign Hawley took out his Bible and the Salesman patted his binnacle-bare skull as though he expected something to smash it in and wanted to remember the loving shape of it. The sick-puppy man crawled out of his hole under the table and crawled back again. The stewards brought us some biscuits. I offered the Russian girl a cigarette, which she accepted, smiling very briefly.

The voice of the young officer went on: "Well, what have we here? A Heinkel down on the sea and

DYNAMITE CARGO

floating off our starboard bow. It won't float long, though. A Jerry is standing on a wing and waving to be picked up. We have ordered one of the mine sweepers to run alongside him. I hope they reach the poor beggar in time. But no—awfully sorry. Somebody on a merchant ship has just cut him down with a Bren gun. Not very sporting. I imagine the merchant-ship chaps are excited. Too bad. Awfully sorry."

I remember shouting at the Briton: "They can't object when somebody pots them. Do they expect to dish it out all the time and never take it?"

I remember him scowling, then brightening up as he got my meaning. "We have to preserve the usages of civilized warfare." I remember the man who was still pretending to read looking up and remarking, "They can't expect any consideration. When a bloke comes into this theater he can expect to be mourner at 'is own funeral."

I later learned that eighty-eight torpedoes were launched at the *Scylla* during that climactic onslaught. I suppose some other lad stood beside the lieutenant counting them and carefully keeping a record. No one told me how many bombs were dropped around us. Every now and then one would

DYNAMITE CARGO

explode near by and the *Scylla* would rock like a cradle and the mess room would reel and we'd roll all over each other, cursing and yelling in sheer panic.

Then the voice from the bridge would crackle: "Well, well, Jerry came rather close with that one. Fifty yards or so. But cheer up, you chaps—thumbs up now. This can't go on forever."

I don't know how long I could have taken it. Towards the end of the afternoon I got a chance to go on deck. During one of the infrequent lulls the mess stewards brought us some corned willy and coffee, apologizing for the fare and explaining that the cooks were passing ammunition. They asked for men for first aid duty topsides. I was one of the many to volunteer. The station to which I was assigned was aft on the starboard side. I had no more than arrived there, with a petty officer, when we saw the track of a torpedo making straight for the *Scylla's* stern. Since there were no torpedo planes operating in our immediate neighborhood I figured that the tin fish had been launched by a U-boat. Now we had everything, the boy on the bridge would be glad to know. We stood there watching in helpless

DYNAMITE CARGO

fascination as the thing cut its milky path. The *Scylla* lunged forward under the sudden full drive of her engines, almost jerking us off our feet. Thankfully we saw the torpedo swish past not twenty feet from our tail. The P.O. put his mouth to my ear and bellowed: "It would have made a proper commotion if it had hit us. We 'ave a magazine full of loose cordite in our stern. Blown us sky 'igh, it would 'ave."

Four of us stood flattened against the *Scylla's* armor-plated house. There was nothing for us to do. I think we were just standing by for any emergency while the regular first aid crew on that station took some men below to the ship's hospital.

The *Scylla's* ack-ack kept up a steady din, squirting a curtain of fire into the low overcast. The rest of the ships in the convoy were astern of us in close formation—closer than I had ever seen them. Momentarily, at least, the aerial attack seemed to have shifted to the warships on our starboard hand. There were half a dozen low-flying Nazis swooping around them, going through their regular acrobatics, diving down close to the water, racing alongside, banking and driving in again for another attack. Around this concentration of action the air

DYNAMITE CARGO

was spotted with black shell bursts, laced with cerise tracer bullets. Several Sea Hurricanes from the carrier darted and dived at the Nazi bombers, who banked and slipped and rolled to escape them, sometimes gave up their attacks on the warships to fight off the Hurricanes. I saw one Heinkel driven down into the water where it pancaked with a great splash as the Hurricane climbed triumphantly over it to go after another one. If there had been more Hurricanes in the show, a lot more merchantmen would have got through. The trouble was the British fliers were always outnumbered.

British accounts of the engagement reported later that four Hurricanes were lost during the voyage—to at least forty Nazis destroyed by planes and ships. I am sure that forty is a more than conservative count for the Nazi toll.

There was evidence of plenty of activity up above us. The choppy, gray sea was churned with the explosions of bombs—the big cabbages that sprouted with a roar and flung themselves apart in a spreading cascade of water. One bomb, as we watched, dropped so close to the carrier that she was blotted out of our sight. We thought for a second she had been hit or had got a near miss that would cripple

DYNAMITE CARGO

her. But when the mess cleared away she was still zigzagging on, apparently untouched and unhurt. I saw none of the parachute torpedoes dropped. Apparently the Nazis had abandoned that device as too uncertain and too difficult to calculate in the northerly wind that was whipping across the ocean.

The warships rolled and swerved, wreathed in the black smoke of their stacks and the smoke of their guns, through which glimmered their ever-changing signal flags. From every ship in our formation came a stream of anti-aircraft fire. At some point or points above the cloud ceiling the barrage must have crossed and there no plane could possibly have survived.

The U-boats were on the convoy's fringes. The wakes of their torpedoes were visible all over the ocean but the corvettes and destroyers kept the subs off. Apparently they were launching their tin fish blindly or with insufficient calculations through their periscopes, and obviously at too great a distance to be effective. Thousands of tons of depth bombs were being dumped into the sea.

Here on a grand scale was a sample of the wastage of war. I wondered how long at this rate our supply

DYNAMITE CARGO

of munitions could last. I asked the P.O. about it, shouting at the top of my lungs into his ear.

"Don't worry," he shouted back. "The rate of fire was anticipated and provided against before we left home."

With my back pressed against the *Scylla*'s vibrating house, my rubber suit zipped up to my chin and my ears ringing with the din, I stood watching this whole prodigious spectacle. We were a battered and reduced fleet from the tremendous convoy of seventy-five warships and a censorable number of merchantmen which had sailed north from the bleak British harbor. But with dark, fat hulls plowing through the gray sea, zigzagging in tight formation (which I wager was giving the skippers more concern than the Nazis), the merchantmen crept on inside the protective escort screen. There was a doggedness about it that was magnificent.

The P.O. pulled my head down. "These Jerries don't relish it any more than you and me. They're getting their bellies full and they aren't caring too much for it."

Presently he pulled my head down again. "The Russians will be taking over any hour now. They'll be meeting us with planes and destroyers—

DYNAMITE CARGO

all fresh as cuckoos and full of fight. Determined chaps, the Russians."

The regular first aid crew appeared and the P.O. thanked me politely and said that I could return below. I would like to have stayed but I recognized it as an order. I gave him a nod and shuffled forward into a companionway and down below.

The stewards were issuing blankets and pillows when I arrived. They were the property of the crew, but the crew, who had eaten at their battle stations, would sleep at them too. I was giving Scotty a report of what I had seen topsides when the *Scylla's* ack-ack suddenly ceased. The shock of silence was almost as unnerving as the shock of sudden sound. We stared at each other with our mouths and eyes agape. Then gradually over the mess room spread the noise, growing louder, of men talking, men delivering judgments, men arguing, men swearing, and men laughing with relief. The Nazis had gone. The voice on the loudspeaker even confirmed it: "The enemy appears to have withdrawn. Well, we hope Jerry enjoyed himself. I can't say we enjoyed having him around. The captain wants me to congratulate the crew and you chaps below too. It was

DYNAMITE CARGO

a very difficult day and everyone conducted himself with admirable . . .”

There was a long pause, and some confused talking on the bridge. Then the boy went on: “We have a flight of planes appearing from the south.” I recalled what the P.O. had said about expecting the Russians any time now. “These fellows are doing a bit of exhibition flying—doing it awfully well. I ought to tell you, it’s the regular way for the Russians to identify themselves so that we’ll know them and not try to cut them down—”

His voice broke off in a stunning explosion—stunning because it was so unexpected, we were so unprepared. Once again sound beat in on us, rolled and echoed through the mess room. It was the *Scylla*’s armament again, going full blast. Then it stopped—just like that.

“Terribly stupid,” came the boy’s voice. “They overdid it, you see. Came rolling down on us like a lot of porpoises and then dropped a bomb. We twigged them at the same moment and let go. They must have known what our custom has been, you see, but not the special arrangement we have this time. We got them all, I am happy to say. One must

DYNAMITE CARGO

concede that it took courage, though it was a rather low, if typically Nazi, subterfuge."

One of the prisoners jumped up. "He's a liar," he yelled in English. "He's a damn liar. It's just another example of dirty English propaganda."

"Ah-h-h, stow it," the British seaman told him. "You ought to be thanking God you're alive."

The rest of us were ready to thank God that we were alive. I got out of my rubber suit and carefully stuffed the cigarettes, the box of cigars and my manuscript down inside one pants leg. Then I spread the blankets which had been issued to me and put my head on a pillow. I had no certain knowledge that we were anywhere near our destination. I had no idea how far the Nazis would carry their attacks into the White Sea. I put out of my mind the necessity of running the same gantlet from east to west on our return trip. I just warmed myself with the conviction that the worst was over. We had won through. I remember wondering hazily if the pretty Russian girl would care for another cigarette. Then I dropped off to sleep, and slept like a stone.

Chapter Eleven

AMONG US WAS a lean, wizen-faced Russian from Yarensk who had been at sea, he said, more years than he could remember. He might have been forty, or he might have been sixty. He talked a smattering of many tongues and mocked the world in all of them. In what passed for English he told us a story of his maternal grandfather and the Russian Czar.

The old man, who lived in Leningrad—it was St. Petersburg then—had got himself into a jam with the police. He was arrested, flung into jail, and sentenced to receive one hundred lashes with the

DYNAMITE CARGO

knout. They started in on him—the raconteur clapped his hands sharply to imitate the crack of the knout and counted, “vun, two, t’ree,” realistically grimacing at each blow—until they had delivered ninety-nine strokes and his maternal grandfather looked like a ripe tomato, though he was not dead. The one-hundredth stroke would have killed him, but it never fell. According to the immemorial custom it was withheld to remind one and all of the benevolence of the Little White Father.

The old man was then rolled onto a blanket, and, as soon as he could be moved without dying from the pain of it, shipped off to Siberia. There he did die finally, but in peace and thanking the Czar for his kindness.

We had something of that same gratitude for the weather, which shrouded us in fog the next morning and saved us from the one-hundredth stroke of the knout. On that last day of the terrible voyage we were spared. We were hidden from the Nazis in the kind fog.

Gingerly we felt our way across the oily ocean, covering the last leg into the White Sea in safety. Towards the late afternoon it began to clear. The British had given the survivors some freedom of the

DYNAMITE CARGO

Scylla's deck, and Scotty and I and several others were standing under her bow guns in the light of a milky evening when an echelon of six planes appeared. Still some distance from us, before their identity was clear, they dropped a bomb which exploded in a huge blob of greasy smoke. Evidently this was the signal.

They came in low. We could clearly see their insignia. One of them roared alongside us, dropped a keg in the water with a long looping line attached to it which fell across the *Scylla's* superstructure. The *Scylla's* men hauled the keg in. It must have contained some communication which could not be entrusted to radio transmission. The plane made a circle and returned. A signalman stood on our bridge wigwagging, and we saw the Russian pilot wave before he turned his tail to us and rushed south again with his friends.

Down in the mess room, relief spread like a fire. We were hilarious. We cheered the Russians. We cheered the Royal Navy. We discussed our future, what they would do with us, whether we would be put ashore, what Russian women were like—one buck maintained you could buy all the favors you wanted in Archangel with a Hershey bar—whether

DYNAMITE CARGO

you could get anything to drink. I had heard that you could do a brisk trade in furs with some tobacco to bargain with. That was one reason I had brought along the cigars and cigarettes. We began to argue. The arguments became more vehement, more idiotic and less friendly. There were even some fist fights, until a P.O. threatened to put the brawlers in irons. Man is an odd animal.

Supper calmed us down. I managed to sit near the Russian girl while I was eating and smiled at her very confidentially, figuring that I was getting along fine in spite of my ignorance of the Russian language. She could probably teach me some if I got ashore in Archangel. Supper calmed me so completely that I went to sleep. I was still asleep when we met the Russian naval squadron and I didn't come to and climb up on deck until the transfer was all over. Scotty told me what had happened. The British warships had turned over the merchantmen and had received a fleet of cargo ships in ballast in return. We were already under way again, headed home. A destroyer had come alongside and had taken off our Nazi prisoners and all the Russian survivors. All of them, Scotty added, including the women.

DYNAMITE CARGO

The boys on the cargo ships who made it all the way through without getting torpedoed had all the luck. I ran into one of them later in New York—Leo, a black-haired oiler who had fought with the Loyalists in Spain before the big show came on. Leo's ship got through unscathed. She dropped anchor finally in a small harbor a few miles from Archangel, Leo told me. Women longshoremen came up the gangplanks and sang as they worked at unloading. Leo said the crew was so impressed they gave the women a hand. Leo was there two months, going to dances which the Russians put on for visiting seamen at the International Club. Of course, it wasn't all caroling and dancing, Leo said. The third night he was there, the Nazis came over and wiped out two whole city blocks, plastering the place with incendiaries besides. And there was not enough to eat. The Russians would often get along on one meal a day, according to Leo, and work twelve hours on it.

At dawn we made out the merchantmen we were escorting home. They were riding high and empty, their slab sides streaked with rust, their decks empty, and looking all together more like a bunch of carcasses on their way to a marine bone yard.

DYNAMITE CARGO

For two days we plodded along, unmolested. There was no complaint about the monotony of it. We sat around while our nerves gradually unwound and the sick and exhausted and shocked returned to a state of comparative normalcy. The burn victims had been removed from the mess room to the ship's hospital. We played cards, checkers, told lies to each other, and discussed the state of shipping. I told my seamen friend that I understood the Mediterranean run was even worse than the North Cape, but what I had seen of the Arctic was all I wanted.

"The Meddy's worse," he confirmed. "I've been on two to Malta. Up here we're doin' a lot better than there, by and large. Only point is, the Meddy's water is warmer when you get ducked into it."

I passed on to my Gloucester shipmate, Nickerson, what the British seaman had said about comparative losses. This wasn't anything like the ten per cent which Nickerson had figured was all that got through. He was glad to hear it. "Looks like I figured it wrong," he admitted. "When a man's New England born he's liable to be a little conservative."

The third day we had an alert. Then we had two

DYNAMITE CARGO

days of anxiety. Occasionally a depth charge tossed up a geyser. Signal flags fluttered messages back and forth. The warship screen fanned out and closed in, and the convoy zigzagged and crawled on. We had been anxious during that early part of the trip when we were heading north. But this anxiety was worse than that. It was more acute. Then we were ignorant of what lay in store for us. Now we knew all the unpleasant possibilities. Before, we had been more or less geared for it. Now we thought we had earned some surcease. We were on our way back and feeling pretty homesick and war sick.

But no attack developed. It became clear to us in the mess room that the Nazis, in calculating the law of averages, had estimated that the results were not worth the price. They would be confronted by just as powerful a defense as the one they had met when we were traveling east laden with supplies. In the mess room we were sure that it was more practical for them to conserve their resources for the next eastbound fleet.

There was griping among us. We were getting back our normal cussedness. Some of us complained because we had to poop along at convoy speed when the *Scylla* could have opened up at thirty-odd knots

DYNAMITE CARGO

and run away from any roving U-boats and landed us back in the British Isles in no time at all. We tried wistfully to think of some kind of break which would compel the *Scylla* to light out and run, carrying us with her. We discovered that we were bearing more to the north and couldn't see any sense in that. What were the goddam British admirals running up to the North Pole for—to get some ice to cool their champagne?

But it was fo'c'sle talk—not very good talk and with little sense to it. It was just the sour conversation of idle men who were sick of their idleness and sick of what they had seen.

One day we did get the break we were all wishing for, though we didn't realize what was up when the *Scylla* abruptly and sharply altered her course one morning and a bosun's pipe sounded through the ship's amplifiers. One of the destroyers was boiling alongside. One of the *Scylla's* crane booms was lowered to the deck, and a bosun's chair was attached to it. Into a swung-out lifeboat piled eight sailors, who stood stiffly at attention. While those of us who had come up on deck watched, Rear Admiral Burnett, heavy-set and stern-faced, came down off the bridge carrying a brief case. He

DYNAMITE CARGO

touched his cap to the officers, who stood there saluting, and climbed into the chair. Finally buckled in, he was swung aloft. The lads in the lifeboat, "side boys" at this maneuver, snapped a salute and the bosun piped the admiral over the side. The cargo boom lifted him out over the water, lowered him carefully and set him down on the deck of the destroyer which was pitching alongside. Aboard the destroyer another pipe shrilled, eight bluejackets on the destroyer stood at salute, and Rear Admiral Burnett stepped gingerly out of the chair. A suitcase and a canvas duffle bag were swung over after him. The destroyer bore away and, breaking out the admiral's flag from her masthead, scuttled off to the position which the *Scylla* had formerly occupied in the convoy. The *Scylla* headed due west, now at full speed. We left the convoy plodding northwest on the same, circuitous route. We were heading for port on our own.

The explanation was that we had some casualties who needed hospitalization ashore. We felt sorry for these unknown guys who had to be rushed to shore bases, but we were overjoyed just the same. Burnett, as commander of the naval escort, had had to stay with the fleet. We stood at the rail watching

DYNAMITE CARGO

the convoy drop out of sight in the mists that lay along the rim of the Arctic Ocean—the high-tailed, flat-topped plane carrier, the slab-sided merchantmen, the destroyers, corvettes, mine sweepers, with their black smoke pluming up into the northern sky and the White Ensign whipping from their gaffs.

We had left them astern and far to the east and north of us when we heard the thunder of their guns. Some of the Nazis must have been at them again.

I have spent my share of time as an American jeering at the "limeys." I take it back.

Kipling once wrote something to the effect that if blood be the price of admiralty, "Lord God, we ha' paid it in."

Lord God, they have.

Chapter Twelve

I COULDN'T REVEAL THE extent of British naval losses on the September convoy (even if I knew them)—any more than I could reveal the number of merchantmen that were sunk. It was a bloody voyage. But I can describe the sinking of one destroyer which I saw; it was described in British papers. She was one of the new, crack Tribal class.

We had been bowling along for two days across a flat ocean. Occasionally we heard a plane above the overcast. The *Scylla*'s captain, bundled in a big bearskin coat, paced the bridge and scanned ocean and sky with his binoculars. The Nazis were trail-

DYNAMITE CARGO

ing along, keeping an eye on us, no doubt, watching for some kind of opening. They didn't seem to have any appetite for an open attack. Once one of them dropped through the ceiling and sent a machine gun spatter at us, but we were well out of range. The burst dropped short, looking like buckshot in a duck pond. The plane vanished before we could bring our guns to bear. Once a U-boat surfaced some distance off and let go a torpedo which missed us by half a mile. We fired on the raider before he submerged, and let some depth charges go, but I am sure we missed him. It was early dawn of the third day that we sighted the British destroyer.

A northeasterly gale had kicked up the ocean and whitecaps were racing along under low, scudding clouds. The destroyer was being towed by a sister ship. She had had two torpedoes shot into her, I learned later, and they were trying to get her into safe harborage. They were several miles away from us, looking phantomlike and unreal in their queer camouflage. But we could see that the crippled vessel was yawing dangerously in the following sea which swept over her stern.

A P.O. barked: "She's breaking up!"

Sure enough, her bow and stern shot up on the

DYNAMITE CARGO

crests of the waves and her midships section plunged out of sight in a turmoil of water that boiled up over her two stacks. Then she was gone.

We didn't stop. The other destroyer would perform any rescue work that was possible. The *Scylla* was too valuable a unit of the Royal Navy to risk in work of this sort with U-boats around us and enemy planes stalking the skies. I noticed the captain in his bearskin coat with his glasses fixed on the spot, his clean-shaven face showing no emotion. We continued on our zigzag course.

It was an incident—over in a few minutes, remote and unreal. What tragedy it carried into some quiet English homes I would not know. They would keep that to themselves. The British "ha' paid it in," without complaining.

They wouldn't allow us castaways ashore in Iceland. They were afraid that we might indiscreetly blab some military secrets, and there might well be—they suspected that there were—Nazi agents among the people of Reykjavik. But our coming into port there started the old wrangle about bonuses. The Salesman decided that we were entitled to \$125 extra money. The rule was far from clear

DYNAMITE CARGO

on the subject. I think it says that contact has to be made aboard the ship of which a man is a regular member. But the Salesman and several of the others interpreted it to fit their special situation. They confronted the Old Man.

He told them shortly that they were crazy. They cursed him. He denounced them. They argued that they were entitled to draw money with shore liberty to boot. He asked them to tell him how he could produce any draw money, and as for shore liberty he referred them to the British Navy. They got nowhere, though they kept on arguing about it long after we had cleared from Iceland and were headed south for Britain.

The Salesman harped on the subject for days, even after we had left the *Scylla*, at last, for good and all, and were ashore in the British Isles. We wound up in Glasgow. American shipping authorities listened to the Salesman unmoved, gave us a modest percentage of our wages and offered us our choice of signing on other ships or going home at the expense of the owners. Unanimously we chose home. Very well, they said, until our passage was arranged the company would pay our room and board.

DYNAMITE CARGO

There is not much whisky in Glasgow nowadays. At least what there is, is tightly rationed. But it was something to have our feet on firm ground. We learned that a British Gaumont news photographer had been aboard the *Scylla* and had taken pictures of the convoy action. They were shown at one of the local theaters.

We saw it. They were distant, faraway shots, but in my mind I could see the Nazi pilots grinning in the Heinkel cabins, the frozen blood on Willy's hanging chin, the muck and mess of the *Jason's* blasted, flooded engine room. I could hear the terrible whoosh of ships exploding one after the other, the hack, hack, hack, hack, hack of the *Scylla's* pom-poms, Black Tom bellowing: "Don't you-all let them Nazi bastards git away wit' nothin'!"

As I watched I had a strange reaction. The experiences I had been through in those few, terrible days had had a kind of unreality. But now, in the little Glasgow movie house, those experiences were suddenly so real and personal that I turned cold at the recollection of them. Looking back, I was more scared than I had been at any time on the whole voyage to Russia. I began to shake all over.

The Salesman, however, had found a fresh com-

DYNAMITE CARGO

plaint. One of the shots showed us making the transfer from the mine sweeper to the *Scylla*. The Salesman had failed to identify himself among the crowd making the leap. The British, he said, had crowded him out of the picture. "We come over here to save their Empire, by God, and then they play it up as an example of British seamanship."

I said to him: "Listen, did you sign on to save the British Empire or connect yourself with a couple of grand?"

He tried a different angle. They had shown shots of Rear Admiral Burnett being hoisted over the side in the bosun's chair. "I get it now," the Salesman said with the air of a man who has just uncovered a conspiracy. "He put the show on so he could get his picture in the newsreel."

We finally sailed from the British Isles. It was a long and frequently anxious voyage. The reason was, our liner's bow was stove in. She had been in a collision and probably had no business being at sea at all. But there was no room for her in British dry docks so she had to crawl back to America for a repair job. It was ticklish business, nursing her along when there was a head sea running. I used to

DYNAMITE CARGO

see Preston Nickerson leaning out over the rail, studying and admiring the way she was handled.

Ordinarily, before the war, she made the crossing in under five days. It was no carriage trade now, though her interior resembled a stable in some respects. She was stripped—no more satinwood furniture and rose taupe carpets. We were packed in six to a room with barely enough space to stow the bags and outfits which we had bought in Scotland. The Salesman was not the only one who bellyached then. "If I had known it was going to be like this," moaned one of our ordinaries, "I woulda signed on in Scotland for another berth."

"You're getting a free ride," I reminded him.

"You call this a free ride?" the Salesman demanded. "It ain't a free ride to be shipped like a lot of goddam cattle."

The ordinary's chief gripe was that there was no grand piano in the saloon. He understood that there used to be. He had taken lessons when he was a kid and he wanted to show us how he could play.

It wasn't the cussedness of American seamen. It was the cussedness of human nature. I've heard plenty of British seamen griping the same way in the bars along the Hudson River water front. A

DYNAMITE CARGO

few have persecution complexes, like the Salesman. Most of them are just normal men who work their rancor off on the inconsequentials of life. In the emergencies they do what they are expected to do, sometimes a good deal more. Compared with the cool professionalism of the British Navy at sea, we bums may not have looked so admirable. But we were not trained to spill our blood and guts on a deck. We were just amateurs at war. When it came to a showdown, in our amateurish way we manned the guns, defended our ship and died in silence. Willy had a brand of courage. So even, did the Salesman. So did the terrible corpse that floated past the mine sweeper that afternoon in the Arctic—before he froze to death in the sea which once upon a time, of his own volition, he had decided to follow.

We had all signed on of our own volition.

As I write this, newspapers are carrying stories from Washington of the number of American seamen who have died already in the war. The toll of dead and missing (who are almost certainly dead) is 3,200. Before I finish writing, the toll will be larger. It is equal to the total dead among the Army, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, according to Washington. Almost four per cent of the seamen

DYNAMITE CARGO

who take out the dirty, rust-streaked merchantmen have been lost. The rate of the dead in the armed services is only three-fourths of one per cent. We don't claim to be heroes. We are the bums. But we deliver the cargoes.

I draped myself over the rail beside Nickerson. "I was just turning over in my mind," he said, "the number of friends of mine who've been run over on the Banks by liners like this. It makes me feel I ain't got any business to be here lookin' over the side."

"What are you going to do when you get back?" I asked. "Sign on again?"

"I figure I'll go back to the Banks. That's my callin'."

I was turning over in my mind what I would do when I got back. I had a wad of dough coming to me—how much I wasn't certain. Scotty had it all down in his notebook. To be frank with myself, I knew I wouldn't have it long. A few weeks in New York and it would vanish. Then what?

I thought it over at length when I did get back. I thought it over in bars, on the train going up to

DYNAMITE CARGO

Fayetteville for a visit, in a hotel room back in the city. A man is a damn fool to crowd his luck, I told myself. I could get a job in a defense plant, make as much money and probably save more of it.

But in the end I signed on again. It was my callin'.

